



COMMUNICATING
Sustainability
JAMES HOGGAN + ASSOCIATES INC.

**AN OVERVIEW
OF THE
SUSTAINABILITY RESEARCH
INITIATIVE**

Introduction

In 1983, the world began a new and confusing conversation. We had realized that, as humans, we had overwhelmed the capacity of the Earth to absorb our mistakes. No longer could isolated communities soil temporary nests and then move on, leaving their garbage dumps as treasures for some future generation. The dumps were filling up. The seemingly endless resources were running out. And we had no real plan for a life on Earth that wouldn't accommodate continuous growth.

In the face of that realization, the United Nations charged former Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland with convening the World Commission on Environment and Development. The Brundtland Commission didn't invent the concept of sustainability, but it delivered one of the first working definitions:

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

Perhaps it sounded poetic in Norwegian, but faced with the English version, a troubling number of people yawned and moved on.

Still, a vague notion of sustainability had entered the public consciousness, and the advertisers, political strategists and corporate tacticians all tried to harness the new term for their own purposes. We increasingly heard of sustainable products, policies and profits. Environmentalists used the word to argue that we should stop cutting down trees, while foresters used it to define the fastest pace at which we could continue. Sustainability was used to mean durability, affordability and attainability – concepts that are related, but not synonymous. It was used to enhance marketability and, too often, to take advantage of gullibility.

And like all words that are asked to mean too much, it soon came to mean nothing at all.

In 2005, James Hoggan & Associates, working in cooperation with the Globe Foundation, engaged three research partners to take a look at what sustainability means to the Canadians today and how it can be communicated tomorrow. The partners were McAllister Opinion Research, StoryTellings™ and Viewpoint Learning, Inc.. Project sponsors included BC Hydro, University of British Columbia, Greater Vancouver Regional District, Canadian Pacific Railway, Concord Pacific, David Suzuki Foundation, The Ethical Funds Company, Lefebvre Foundation, Fraser Basin Council, International Centre for Sustainable Cities, Alcan Inc. and the Port of Vancouver.

The pages that follow provide a very brief overview of their findings and a resulting set of communications recommendations.

As you read, bear in mind that the concerns that inspired Brundtland 23 years ago are even more pressing today. As we contemplate questions of global viability and human

survivability, it is clearly more important than ever to engage the public – to ensure that all of our efforts and relationships are truly sustainable.

Sustainability Research Initiative – Key Findings

The Sustainability Research Initiative used three distinct methodologies in an effort to understand the current public perception of and attitudes toward sustainability and to discover how best to engage people in future conversations. McAllister Opinion Research, led by Angus McAllister, began with its annual Environmental Monitor, a national telephone poll that examines Canadian attitudes towards the environment and includes questions specifically on sustainability. Steve Rosell’s Viewpoint Learning then followed up with four “Choice Dialogues™” - small-group sessions designed to understand current attitudes and predict the future direction of people’s views on important issues. The Choice Dialogues aimed to better understand what they know now about sustainability and what they may be ready to learn and support in the near future. Edward Wachtman’s group then conducted five “StoryTellings™” sessions designed to gain deeper insight into how people think about the issue – to discover the emotional triggers and narrative drivers that animate the story in their minds today and that act as roadmaps for a conversation ongoing. McAllister Opinion Research rounded out the project in early 2006 by testing the concepts that had emerged in the previous group sessions in a national online poll of 500 thought leaders and a second online poll of 2,500 Canadians.

All of these processes and their findings are presented in depth in the three parties’ individual reports. We encourage you to read the reports in their entirety. They are rich with data and insights. This very brief overview is intended to capture highlights and intersections that may most obviously inform the effort to communicate effectively about sustainability.

The Hard Truth about Sustainability

People don't know what it is:

In the McAllister Opinion Research, among the general public, only 16 per cent of those surveyed felt they were “very familiar with the concept of sustainability;” 36 per cent were “not very familiar,” “not familiar at all” or just didn't know.

But they know what it's not:

Ninety-three per cent of those surveyed agreed that “overuse of the world's natural resources is a threat to the health and welfare of future generations.” In the Choice Dialogues, 90 per cent of participants said ‘no,’ when asked if we should – or could – “continue on our current path?” At the same time, 93 per cent said ‘yes,’ when asked if we should “develop more sustainable cities and regions.”

Once they understand it, they like the concept:

In their discussions about what they could support related to sustainability, the Choice Dialogues participants found much common ground, including support for full cost pricing; smart growth principles in urban design; more government priority for environmental protection; more public education and better labeling; and a need and desire for more community involvement.

These findings were confirmed in the McAllister polling.

This is good news in contemplating future communications. While Canadians are confused about the word, they quickly grasp – and value – the concept when it is explained. It's the word that they don't understand; they recognize the concept immediately and it aligns well with their values as Canadians.

Significant barriers stand in the way of action:

However, significant barriers stand in the way of individuals taking action. Mindset barriers such as force of habit, consumerism and peer pressure to over-consume; a sense of entitlement that ‘we deserve the good life’ and human nature that one person alone can't make a difference became apparent. Prices that do not reflect real long-term social and environmental costs; measures to assess performance, such as GDP, reinforce focus on short-term economic factors; and the way media covers – or fails to cover – sustainability issues were seen as significant informational barriers to changes in individual behaviour.

People mistrust their leaders:

But in our opinion, the single most significant barrier to communicating effectively on sustainability is the atmosphere of mistrust among Canadians. Mistrust of business is at an all time low. In 1992, 66 per cent of those surveyed in the Environmental Monitor agreed that “industry is working hard to ensure a clean environment,” while 34 per cent disagreed. Today, 56 per cent of respondents actively disagree with that statement.

Across the board, mistrust of government is also endemic; but on environmental questions, mistrust of industry is specific. Most respondents said they want and expect government to take greater responsibility.

The opportunity

This, again, offers hope and creates a real opportunity for those who can communicate effectively on sustainability. Canadians are looking for leadership; they will welcome clear, credible voices in the conversation. Leaders can be confident that the public supports sustainability. But to be successful, leaders must have credibility and build trust. They must be seen to have the public's interest at heart. Given the high level of mistrust today, this is no small challenge.

Sustainability Audiences

In the analysis of quantitative findings, McAllister Opinion Research identified four segments based on familiarity with the notion of sustainability and support for achieving it. These are:

1. **The Choir (SOLD)** represents 15 percent of Canadians and is comprised of those who are familiar with sustainability and sold on the concept. They are predominantly highly educated young adults and boomers with a strong sense of connection to community.
2. **The Congregation (RECEPTIVE)** represents the 67 percent of the population that does not understand the word sustainability, but are highly enthusiastic once it is explained. This segment ought to be the main focus of sustainability communications. They are comprised largely of female boomers with non-university post-secondary education. The Congregation do not reside in large Canadian urban centers like Toronto, but in smaller cities and towns. They feel strongly connected to community and care about the health of their families.
3. **The Heathen (OBLIVIOUS)** represents the 16 percent of Canadians that are oblivious to the notion of sustainability and are not interested when it is explained to them. The Heathen are predominantly disconnected autonomous young adults under age 35 that are primarily focused on survival and social status. Unlike all the other segments, the Heathen do not agree that North American consumerism ultimately leaves most people feeling unfulfilled and wanting more. The Heathen aspire to be consumers.
4. **The Atheists (REJECTING)** represent the two percent of Canadians that understand the notion of sustainability, but reject it because they believe the economy must come first. Atheists tend to be highly educated,

affluent older men, although there is also a strong showing of young university-educated males.

Emotional Triggers

Stories are *the* fundamental form of communication. If we want to communicate in a way that captures peoples' imaginations, and reaches them at an emotional level, we tell a story. The StoryTellings™ research revealed some shared sensibilities that make people more open to a sustainability discussion. Edward Wachtman's analysis of the StoryTellings™ sessions found the following elements inherent to the sustainability story:

- **A quest for meaning and fulfillment** – although it isn't always “top-of-mind,” most Canadians want their lives to matter and their actions to count in a positive way;
- **We are in this together** – Canadians also recognize their interdependence at the local and, increasingly, global levels;
- **'Making it right'** – there was a consistent theme of cultural malaise and dysfunction in stories about sustainability. Participants consistently spoke of 'being on the wrong path'; a path that in the end is not personally fulfilling or meaningful. Countering this was an equally strong desire to make amends or to make things right; and,
- **Hope** – was *the* overarching theme in the sustainability story; hope for a better, material world; hope for a more humane world. Hope is a powerful emotion; especially in North America. Our ancestors—by and large—came here seeking a hopeful future.

The StoryTellings™ process included having participants create team stories using words and pictorial images. Some of the pictorial and verbal images that occurred repeatedly and their symbolic meanings are:

- The circle or orb: represents wholeness, completeness...it stands in juxtaposition to the fragmented malaise of our culture;
- Children: they are our hope for the future;
- Grandparents and elders: they are the 'connectors' between the past and the future, they are the transmitters of a community's traditions and values; and,
- The changing seasons: the inevitability of change, the cycle of life.

Across the group work and in the polling, the environment figures prominently. A sincere concern for the environment arises as a strong part of the Canadian identity, even though the subject is often overwhelmed in top-of-mind opinion poll surveys that are more likely to focus on issues-of-the-day, such as health care and taxes.

All of this points to an openness, even an eagerness, on the part of the public to engage on issues of sustainability. Again, regardless of the confusion around the term, the

underlying principle speaks to a broad public appetite for initiatives and policies that contribute to a healthy environment, a strong society and a generational legacy of which we can be proud.

But the question remains, if values are in line with sustainability, why don't actions and voting patterns reflect this?

Barriers

Some of the key barriers to sustainability are mentioned earlier. Among the three research partners, the following are the barriers to action.

Viewpoint Learning Barriers

1. Structural barriers – Cost and convenience.
2. Mindset: Habit – “We deserve a good life”; and hopelessness – “One person can't make a difference”.
3. Information: “Distorted lens of media” (people don't understand their own role in making changes and they don't believe their neighbours care); misleading price signals (because the costs of pollution are difficult to apportion fairly, things that are “cheap” to buy often come at a huge expense to the environment, while things that are environmentally benign are often expensive to buy), inadequate labeling, etc.
4. Mistrust: We mistrust industry, government, and one another, and if we don't trust others to act – especially our leaders – then we won't act.
5. Isolation: We suffer a weak sense of community; again there is a sense that people are acting alone.
6. The word *sustainability*: It is abstract, uninspiring and vague, and continuously being redefined by self-serving interest groups.

StoryTellings™ Barriers

1. *Vague* sense of unease (of dis-ease) that is disturbing but not critical. And as with most things, if there is no crisis, there will be no change.
2. Blame and mistrust: both are dispiriting rather than inspiring.
3. Isolation and alienation: these militate against any sense of personal or collective empowerment.

McAllister Opinion Research Barriers

1. Negativity: communication that is “all problems and no solutions” is dispiriting, leads to guilt, depression and paralysis.
2. Canada's reputation: there is an erroneous view that Canada has a proud record of environmental stewardship, when our actual per capita consumption of resources is among the highest in the world.

3. Overemphasis on costs: the discussion is “all stalk; no carrot” – sustainability advocates offer many threats but few rewards.
4. “Character flaw” framing: there is a sense that over consumption is an inevitable feature of human nature; a sense that “only God can sort this out.”
5. “Distorted lens”: Canadians are convinced that they are acting alone.

You can see the pattern: the sustainability conversation is likely to leave people suspicious and dispirited. They believe that moving to a pattern of sustainable living will be costly – full of sacrifice – and they don’t believe their neighbours understand, care or will match their performance. This was evident in the Choice Dialogues’ discussions and validated further in McAllister research. When the latter asked respondents specifically why they do NOT behave more sustainably, respondents point to a lack of government leadership, lack of information and solutions, and an inability to solve problems alone.

Only four per cent attributed their own inaction to a lack of concern. Asked why others failed to act, survey respondents again cited lack of government leadership, but fully 48 per cent said they thought their neighbours weren’t concerned.

People want to do the right thing but nobody wants to be a chump. Nobody wants to be the only person on the block wearing a hair shirt in a hopeless effort to save a world.

10 Principles for Communicating in a Climate of Mistrust (Viewpoint Learning)

1. Effective communication is 80% performance; 20% telling people about it.
2. Make few promises, and keep them faithfully. Performance should exceed expectations.
3. Core values must be made explicit and framed in ethical terms. (Value-free stands are seen as deceitful.)
4. More is expected from privileged institutions.
5. Silence/denial/closed doors will be interpreted as bad faith.
6. No one gets the benefit of the doubt.
7. Anything but plain talk is suspect.
8. The public is genuinely hungry for honest/integrity.
9. Noble goals with flawed execution is seen as hypocrisy, not idealism.
10. Walk the talk: make a conscious effort to move toward a “stewardship” ethic.

Hoggan's Seven Rules for Communicating Sustainability

The Sustainability Research Initiative identified a receptive audience eager to learn more about sustainability. The McAllister polling identified this group as the Congregation and estimates it to represent about 67 per cent of Canadians. These individuals are unfamiliar with the term, but supportive once they understand what it represents. Target this group in your efforts to advance your sustainability agenda and keep the following in mind:

1. Communicate Through Action

This is a good rule in every aspect of public relations and, accordingly, it has given rise to any number of descriptive cliché's ("actions speak louder than words;" "effective communication is 80% performance; 20% telling people about it"). But it is especially critical when communicating on the subject of sustainability for two reasons: people are confused about the meaning of the word; and people are skeptical to the point of mistrust about government and corporate sincerity.

So, speak about what you *do*, rather than what you *are*. Don't try to tell people you are a "sustainable company;" tell them what things you are doing to help make your company – and the world – more sustainable.

2. Define the Term

Even among people who think they know what "sustainability" means, the word can evoke any number of definitions. For example, someone referring to "economic sustainability" may be referring to a fiscal consideration totally divorced from an environmental bottom line. This confusion has led to increased mistrust – to the point that the word "sustainability" itself may prompt a negative public reaction.

A recent TeckCominco ad showed how *not* to do it: the ad boasted that the company is "a world leader in developing new technologies that make mining more economically and environmentally sustainable." Far from building the company's reputation, this ad merely raises the question: what might TeckCominco mean by mining that is "more economically and environmentally sustainable"? Statements like this are too vague and don't say anything.

In a much better example, Capers and the Vancouver Aquarium got this just right in a recent ad on "ocean-friendly seafood." The ad said:

"Sustainable" means that a seafood species is:

- abundant and resilient to fishing pressures;
- well-managed, based on current research and data;
- harvested to minimize by-catch of other species; and,
- harvested using methods that don't damage ocean habitats.

Capers didn't lay any broad claim to sustainability, but it demonstrated clear understanding of what the word means. That goes a long way toward chipping away at public cynicism.

3. Use the Language of Accountability

In a climate of mistrust, generalities are more likely to alienate than reassure your audience. Provide specifics; don't talk about things unless people can tell that you're actually doing them. If you're talking about something that people can not measure or confirm, you're probably saying something that they won't believe. Claims of sustainability that are specific and measurable will build your credibility and protect against a charge of hypocrisy, if it can be argued that some other part of your operation is not currently run on a sustainable basis.

A series of UBC ads that spoke specifically to measurable sustainability targets serve as a good example. One of them, for instance, states that UBC Vancouver is five years ahead of schedule in meeting its share of Canada's Kyoto commitments.

Poor examples can be found in sustainability ads by Enbridge and Hemlock Printers. The Enbridge ad was specific, referring to Enbridge's support of the Pacific Salmon Project, but it asks readers to credit the whole company as sustainable because it supports a single stream-restoration organization. That's too big a stretch.

Hemlock said boldly that it is "committed to sustainability" without providing a single example of what that might mean or how Hemlock's performance might be measured.

People want specifics. They want transparency and clarity. They want labels that tell them exactly what is in their food. They will not accept corporations assuming labels like "sustainability" without justifying their terms.

4. Use a Human Voice; Tell a Story

There is a tendency when *one* is pondering grand notions to revert to the language of the lecture hall – to high-toned pontification. Don't. To the degree that this ever worked, it has been rendered obsolete – even offensive – by the Internet. The Internet has revived the art of the conversation – conversation that occurs in what the authors of *The Cluetrain Manifesto: The End of Business as Usual* describe as

language that is natural, open, honest, direct, funny and often shocking. Whether..... explaining or complaining, joking or serious, the human voice is unmistakably genuine. It can't be faked...Most corporations...only know how to talk in the soothing, humorless monotone of the mission statement, marketing brochure and your-call-is-important-to-us busy signal. Same old tone, same old lies.

(Cluetrain Manifesto: The End of Business as Usual, Levine, Locke, Searls & Weinberger, 2001)

Avoid corporate speak. Avoid talking vaguely about concepts in favour of speaking directly to people and about people and the things that matter to them. Don't talk about "economic indicators;" talk about "jobs." Don't talk about "the environment;" talk about fresh air and clean water.

This is also an essential consideration when dealing with numbers. Use statistics that matter to people. Don't talk about tons of greenhouse gases. Talk about fuel efficiency in litres or gallons consumed or numbers of cars off the road. Talk about numbers people can relate to.

5. Be Hopeful: Tone Matters

Good leaders inspire hope, not panic. If your communications material paints a dark and threatening future, if it engenders fear or guilt or shame, your audience will turn off. You can use the negative impacts of inaction to get attention, but don't dwell on the negative. Also, if your point of view is seen as extreme, you'll suffer a lack of credibility. And, as the British sustainability research firm Futerra points out, if you confront someone with the difference between their attitude and their actions by pointing out that what they do doesn't align with what they say, they are more likely to change their attitude than their actions. People want and need encouragement. So choose hope, not hype.

6. Offer Solutions; Identify Benefits

The public is overwhelmingly convinced of the value of sustainability, but they are not sure what they can do personally, and they fear that they are acting alone. Give them options, point out potential benefits and celebrate successes. Use examples of others' successes – other companies, other individuals, other countries. Articulate the benefits that will come of sustainable actions. Will they save money? Time? Energy? Avoid language of sacrifice like "give up your car" and abstract policy goals like "sound land use planning." Use tangible, practical benefits like less congestion, money savings and less asthma. Less affluent consumers are particularly responsive to simple cost-saving messages.

7. Let People Know they are Not Alone

Most Canadians say they care about issues related to sustainability, believe that their friends care, but believe everyone else does not. And, those who believe that other Canadians do NOT care are significantly less likely to care themselves.

This sense of isolation discourages action. The research shows that people understand the notion of sustainability best when they think of themselves as part of a community of

like-minded individuals—‘people in the know, people who care’. Use social pressure to encourage change. Create a sense of “it’s what people like us do”.

Examples of messaging that works came from researchers at Arizona State University (ASU). They developed a series of messages urging hotel guests to reuse their towels, messages ranging from, “Help the hotel save energy,” to “Join your fellow citizens in helping to save the environment.” In every case, the ASU academics found that people were more likely to comply when they believed that they were joining others in a collective effort.

Another research project, by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, tested a series of messages that encouraged people to stay on walking trails in California’s Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks. The worst message was this: “Many past visitors have gone off the established paths, changing the natural state of the Sequoias and vegetation in this park.” Seventy per cent of the people who read this sign joined the majority and strayed off the path.

When people begin to understand that they are already living in a committed community, they will redouble their own efforts and they will be quicker to credit others – including business, governments and non-governmental organizations – whose good deeds are making a difference.

No one wants to be the only person making sacrifices to save the world.

Sustainability Analysis:
A Sustainability Case Study: Interface, Inc.

While the Hoggan team was working with the researchers on the Sustainability Research Initiative, we had the good fortune to hear Ray Anderson, president of Interface Inc., speak about his personal and professional journey toward sustainability. We recognized that his story mirrors the structure that the StoryTellings™ research identified as THE sustainability story. The following illustrates how Ray Anderson's story aligns with the StoryTellings™ research findings.

In the early 1990s, Ray Anderson was drifting through another profitable year in a nicely profitable life. As the chairman of [Interface, Inc.](#), he oversaw the world's largest manufacturer of commercial and residential modular carpet and a leading producer of commercial broadloom and commercial fabrics. Yet, in spite of the strength of a business that he had founded in 1973, he was increasingly bothered by criticism – from employees and, especially, from his customers – that he “didn't get it” on the question of sustainability.

In 1994, two Interface managers set up a task force to assess Interface's environmental practices and being to frame answers. The managers asked Anderson to address the first meeting of the task force, precipitating something of a crisis for a CEO who had given the environment no real consideration. In preparation, Anderson read Paul Hawken's, *The Ecology of Commerce*, which argued that the industrial system is destroying the planet and only industry leaders are powerful enough to stop it. Anderson got it. In fact, he says now that, as he considered the environmental destruction caused by his own business, he sat at his desk and he cried.

Then he got up, read the Riot Act to his employees and set about pushing Interface to an impractical goal. According to a plan that Anderson calls “Mission Zero,” he is determined that Interface's industrial impact will be environmentally neutral by 2020.

Interestingly, the corporate transformation has been all about profit. When Interface reduced energy consumption by almost half since 1995, it saved money. When it reduced the amount of manufacturing waste by more than half, it saved more money. When it increased the use of recycled material from less than one per cent in 1995 to more than 15 per cent today, it saved yet more money. And the harder the company tried to meet its sustainability goals, the more popular it became, with customers and investors.

Anderson himself now spends a huge amount of time on the speaking circuit, telling a story of crisis and reconciliation – of epiphany and transformation. He is that rare thing: an evangelist with incontrovertible credibility.

Think about the Ray Anderson story and then compare it to the StoryTellings™ illustration of the plotline for “The Sustainability Story.” It's a near perfect fit.

Anderson had:

1) *a sense of unease* – when a sales manager reported complaints from a major customer that, when it came to the environment, “Interface just doesn’t get it,” Anderson said: “Interface doesn’t get what?”

2) *a triggering event* – when his management staff insisted that he address a new Interface environmental task force, Anderson began to recognize that in his life he had never given any thought to what he or his company had taken from the Earth or were doing to the Earth. “I do not have an environmental vision. I do not want to make that speech. ... I cannot get beyond, ‘we obey the law. We comply.’”

3) *an epiphany* – while reading Paul Hawken’s *The Ecology of Commerce*, he “got it”. Says Anderson, “I was a plunderer of the Earth and that was not the legacy one wants to lead behind. I wept.”

4) *a reconciliation* – “I made that speech, drawing shamelessly on Hawken’s material and I challenged that tiny gathering, only 16 or 17 people, to lead our company to sustainability.”

5) *a transformation* – “What started out as ‘the right thing to do’ very quickly became clearly, obviously, the smart thing as well. The cost savings from eliminating waste alone have been \$289 million cumulatively over 10 and three quarter years. ... Our products are the best they’ve ever been because sustainability has proven to be an unimagined source of inspiration and innovation.”

6) *return and responsibility* – “There is no amount of money we could have spent on advertising that would have generated as much goodwill or contributed as much to the top line, to winning business.” That in turn generated for Anderson an evangelical message: “This revised definition of success, this new paradigm, has a name – doing well by doing good. It is a better way to bigger profits and it cries out to be taught in our business schools and our engineering schools that will be training the engineers who must develop sustainable technologies of the future.”

Your Sustainability Story

Now consider that the people involved in the StoryTellings™ session had no knowledge of the Ray Anderson story. This plotline emerged consistently in dozens of other stories: this is how people think about sustainability. It’s the narrative structure in which they understand the subject.

The Interface story also exemplifies what StoryTellings™ identified as the “meta-theme” of sustainability: hope. The unavoidable message from Ray Anderson’s story is that success is there if you reach for it. The story also picks up other core themes: the

importance of community – of working together – and the overarching reality of interconnectivity. As Anderson recognized, we have only one Earth and humankind has certainly reached a point where the implications of action in one part of our planet can – and will – be felt at the farthest reaches.

The challenge for anyone hoping to communicate effectively on sustainability is to keep these themes in mind and, especially, to honour this plotline. Your credibility depends upon moving through the story without skipping any steps. You cannot engage a skeptical public in a story about reconciliation and transformation until you have had a corporate epiphany.

At the same time, if you assure that your communications always reflect your actions, you can make significant headway in specific areas without having to tackle every issue in your organization at once. By speaking about the sustainable things that you *do*, rather than overstate how sustainable you *are*, you will have an excellent opportunity build a foundation of smaller successes. You will earn your credibility one very specific initiative at a time.

***For more information about the Communicating Sustainability research,
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