

Is perfection the enemy of progress?

When it comes to tackling the climate crisis, the world's scientists have warned that it's now or never. We're on the brink of irreversible tipping points. We can, and must, halve global emissions by 2030. Inaction is not an option. Stakeholders, investors, customers and the planet are demanding action. Everything depends on it.

But we're also living through an age of greenwashing, the practice of making misleading or unsubstantiated environmental claims. It's in the spotlight like never before. And pressure is mounting to crack down on it.

Investors, consumers and stakeholders are increasingly looking for reliable information to assess green claims. They want authenticity and action, not lip service. Moreover, scrutiny from regulators around the world is intensifying.

In this context, it's understandable that leaders of any company might feel wary of taking sustainability action, for fear of being called out on imperfect practices. But this isn't a viable option. At this crucial moment in time, the last thing we need is a dangerous backwards step. We can't let perfection be the enemy of progress.

Action is the key to leadership positioning on sustainability. Commitments, targets and pledges are vital, but they're meaningless without tangible change.

Sustainability leadership takes commitment and perseverance. Trust is achieved through sustained action, not short-term initiatives. Taking a leadership position on sustainability brings so many rewards, financially, reputationally and, not least, morally. However, it can be hard to get right. Communication is fundamental, but it has to be done properly and authentically.

Here are our five golden rules at Forster Communications:

1. **Be action focused.**

Build a leadership position by detailing the programmes and activities the business is undertaking. Tell stories about the 'how', as well as the 'what'. Don't just talk in abstract terms. Show action and progress. Provide case studies and examples to humanise and clarify.

2. **Be proportionate.**

Don't overstate or big up minor steps. Expert, responsible PR is about creating authentic, engaging narratives, without being self-congratulatory. Be clear about how all projects fit within broader commitments, action and progress. Explain that each activity is just one part of organisational transformation. Demonstrate a long-term commitment to a better, greener and fairer way of doing things.

3. **Be transparent and honest.**

Build and maintain trust through clear, honest and humble communications. Be clear on the progress being made and don't shy away from describing the challenges – alongside the ingenuity and creativity being applied to overcome them.

4. **Know your audience.**

Understand where they are on their own sustainability journey and communicate with them accordingly. Ensure to make complex scientific or technical information accessible. Use storytelling. Always consider at the outset what you want your audience to think, feel and/or do as a result of your communication.

5. **Evolve and persist.**

Trust and leadership take time. Don't expect overnight plaudits. Commit for the long-term, especially as the necessary organisational change will undoubtedly be a lengthy and complex process. Ensure to keep communicating ongoing action.

We covered these golden rules at our recent working with ICRS members and invited attendees to run through an exercise, exploring how to avoid greenwash and greenhush. Some of the key concerns facing those who joined the session included:

- Overclaiming what the impact will be
- Downplaying the reality
- Communicating accurately but not overburdening
- Terminology and translating across different markets
- Negative backlash no matter what you say