



# Dispatches from the Purpose-Driven Landscape: 2024 Edition

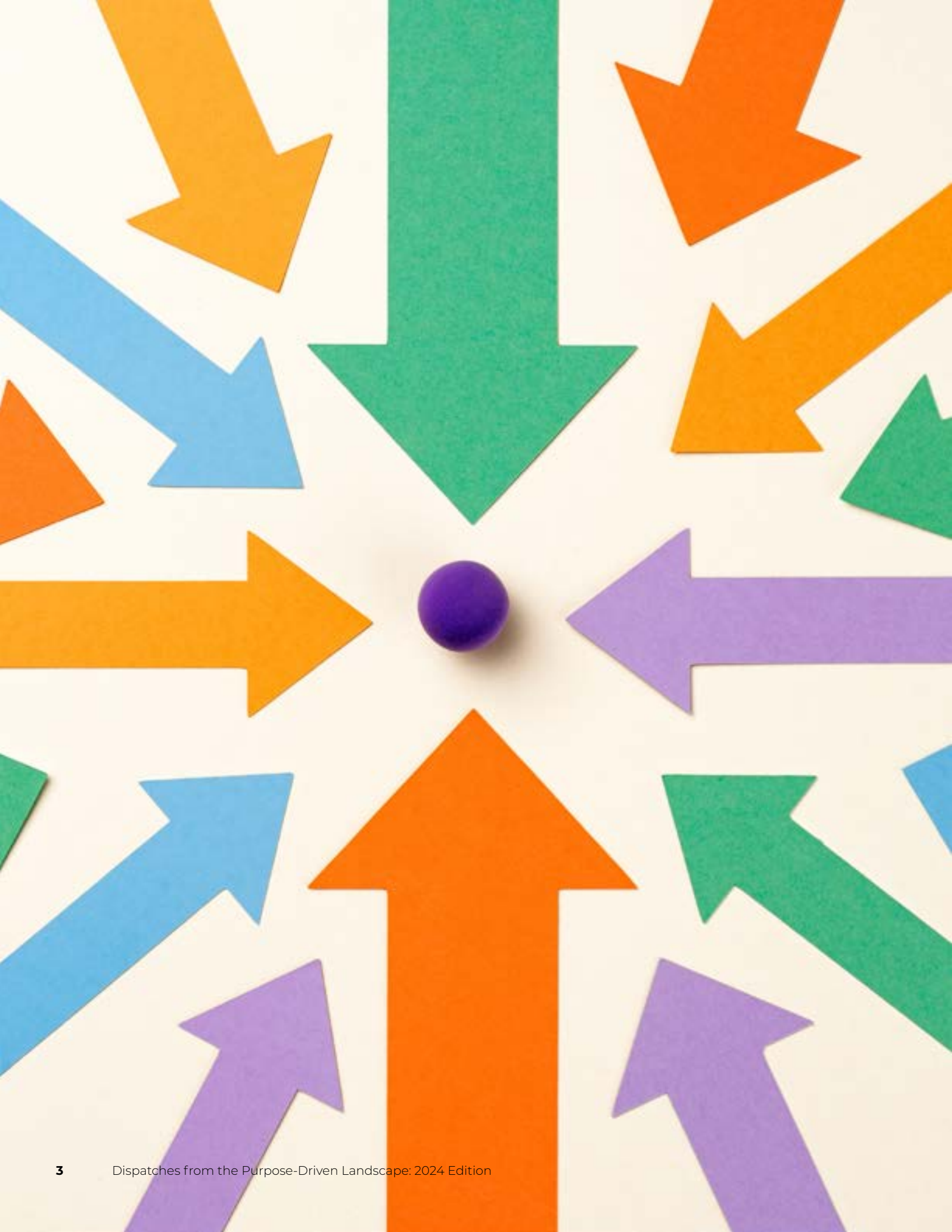
A FINN Partners Publication



## Table of Contents

<b>3</b>	<b>Introduction</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Purpose-Driven Leadership</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Foreword</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>Chapter One: Environment &amp; Sustainability</b>
7	Sustainability + Health Systems: US and EU Perspectives: Health Systems Must Look in the Mirror
8	Communicating Sustainably on World Tourism Day
10	Doing and Saying the Right Thing—the EU Gets to Grips with Greenwashing and Misleading Claims
12	Intersection of Public Health and Sustainability: Why it Matters Now More Than Ever
14	We Are Running Out of Time to Save the Planet. Act Now!
16	Navigating the Anthropocene: A Deep Dive into Our Climate Conundrum
17	Defining Sustainable Strategies
18	Solutions-Oriented Communications Can Extinguish Climate Anxiety
<b>20</b>	<b>Chapter Two: Organizational Reputation</b>
21	War and Purpose — Building Brands for a Sustainable Future
23	The Secret to Transforming Workplace Culture? Better Middle Managers
25	Why The Current (And Poor) Employee Engagement Landscape Could Be A Good Thing
27	Avoid Greenwashing and Green Hushing: Unlock the Real Value of PR to Drive and Practice Sustainability Communication
29	How to ‘Speak’ Purpose without Rocking the Boat: Six Smart Tips
31	The Shifting Landscape of Brand Purpose: Unveiling Consumer Priorities
33	Philanthropic Ventures Take Center Stage
<b>35</b>	<b>Chapter Three: Social Impact</b>
36	Is “Whataboutism” Killing Empathy?
39	Danger in Abstraction Politics vs. People in an Election Year
41	A System for Happiness
42	Global Public Health: A Pathway to Equality and Prosperity
44	Plagued By Debate — When Self-Interest and Facts Collide
46	Lessons from Anne Frank
<b>47</b>	<b>Afterword: An Unavoidable Complexity</b>





## Introduction



One of the central themes of the third edition of this FINN Partners eBook—*Dispatches from the Frontlines of Purpose*—is the idea that purpose and business achievement must align. Companies

My colleagues often emphasize that no single person or organization can solve the world's problems alone. Meaningful change requires collaboration across sectors, bringing together the strengths and resources of businesses, non-profits, governments, and communities. The ideas presented in this eBook demonstrate how working hard and playing nice can amplify impact, enabling organizations to achieve more together than they ever could alone.

that embrace a purpose in sync with their business mission and customers often find that it leads to greater success. This is because purpose-driven organizations tend to attract and retain top talent, build stronger relationships with stakeholders, and foster loyalty among customers. In a world where consumers are increasingly discerning and values-driven, a commitment to social impact can set a company apart from its competitors.

At FINN Partners, we are committed to fostering such collaborations. We believe that working together we can tackle the most pressing issues of our time—climate change, social inequality, or public health challenges. Our approach is rooted in the belief that purpose-driven work is not a solo endeavor; it's a collective effort that requires diverse perspectives, shared values, and a common vision for a better future.

Moreover, purpose-driven initiatives often lead to innovation. When organizations are motivated to solve social problems or address communal needs, they are more likely to think creatively and explore new solutions. This can lead to the development of products, services, and business models that meet market demands and contribute to the greater good. The writings in this eBook illustrate how purpose remains a powerful catalyst for innovation, driving progress in ways that benefit society and the bottom line.

As you explore the pages of this eBook, we hope you will be inspired to reflect on your purpose and how it aligns with your work. Whether you are a business leader, a non-profit champion, or a courageous person looking to make a difference, the insights shared here offer a roadmap for integrating purpose into your mission. Remember, purpose is not a destination; it's a continuous journey that requires constant reflection, adaptation, and commitment. But as the authors in this eBook convey, it is a journey worth taking.

Peter Finn, CEO & Founding Partner



# Purpose-Driven Leadership



**Gil Bashe**

Managing Partner, Chair  
Global Health & Purpose  
United States



**Terri Bloore**

Senior Partner  
United Kingdom



**Cullen Burnell**

Vice President, Chief of Staff  
Health & Purpose  
United States



**Jason Cao**

Senior Partner  
China



**Jeff Freedman**

Managing Partner  
United States



**Carolina Gasparoli**

Vice President  
United Kingdom



**Nicole Grubner**

Partner  
Israel



**Aman Gupta**

Managing Partner, Health  
Practice Asia Lead  
India



**Betsy Henning**

Managing Partner, Global  
Employee Engagement  
Practice Lead  
United States



**Christopher Nial**

Senior Partner  
United Kingdom



**Amy Terpeluk**

Managing Partner, Global  
Purpose & Social Impact Lead  
United States



**The business relationship between purpose and profit is a delicate balancing act. Companies with a culture rooted in purpose and focused on social impact can outperform financially, but walking that path is not easy. Business objectives, strategy, and customer needs must remain central to all mission, marketing, and money management decisions and often, companies lose sight of the connection between solid business fundamentals and their aspirations.**

As communicators and corporate social responsibility leaders, we are charged with considering the risks and rewards of engaging issues and communities. The expression of purpose in every era is a dynamic process, constantly evolving to respond to the pulse of societal urgency. What was meaningful in one moment in time can suddenly become toxic just weeks later, highlighting the need for constant adaptation and innovation.

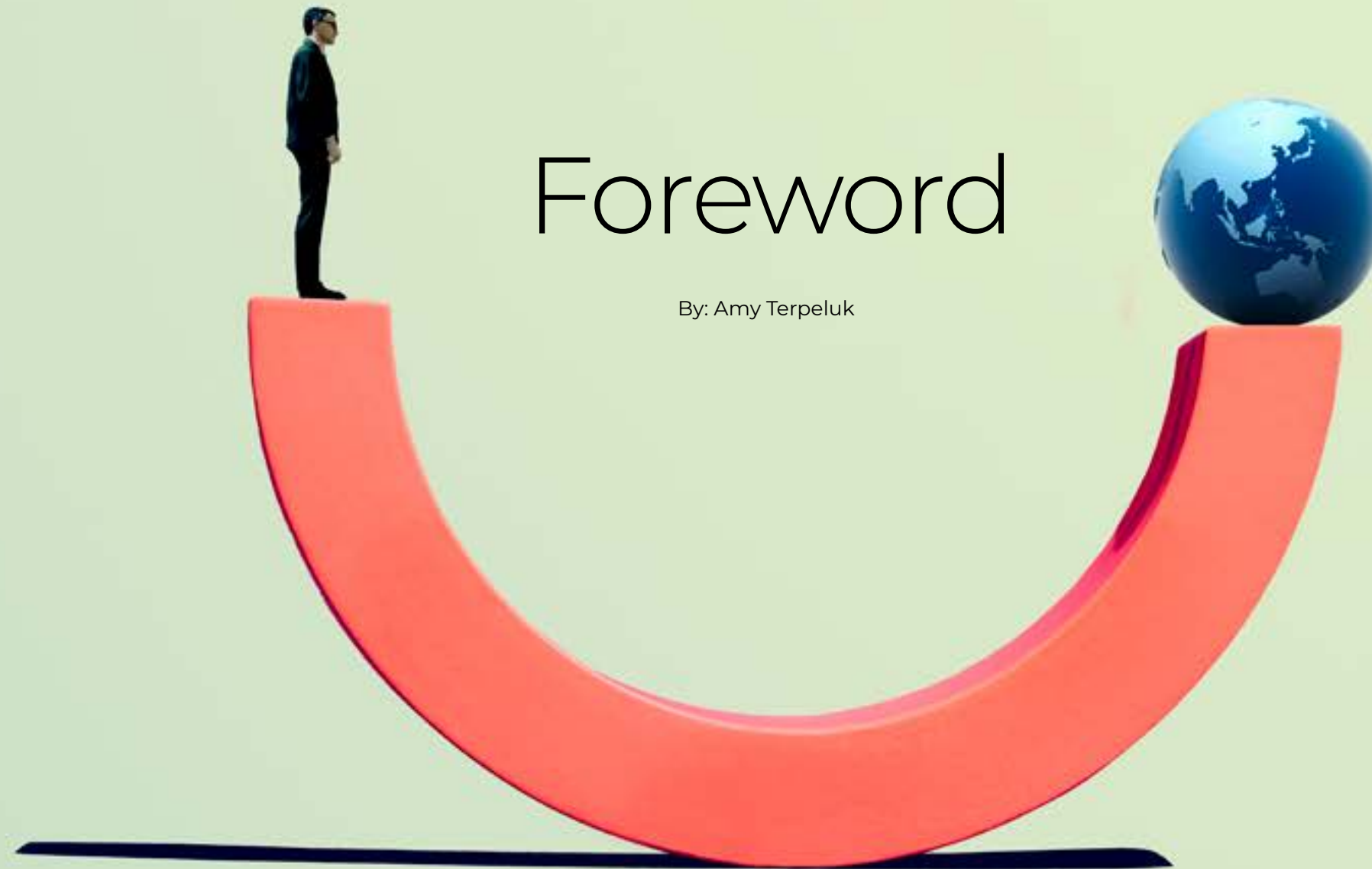
The following pages share insights from some of today's keenest communication leaders.

Written at this moment, they reflect ideas and opinions that can help guide communications and business decision-making.

No matter the political or social climate, it is evident that companies that are open to embracing purpose and social impact are better prepared to navigate the complexities facing corporate leaders and achieve sustained success. Communicators and corporate social responsibility leaders play a crucial role in shaping the future of business. The bottom line is dependent on staying in tune with the marketplace and keeping a keen eye on a sustainable future.

The perspectives in this publication reflect the nature of the modern purpose-driven landscape – its opportunities, pitfalls, and considerations.

Purpose-driven business success: it's what fuels the FINN Partners Purpose and Social Impact Practice. We hope these words spark conversation and ideas with your colleagues.





A man and a child are walking through a dense forest of ferns. The man is wearing a red jacket and the child is wearing a yellow jacket. They are both looking upwards. The scene is dimly lit, suggesting a forest setting.

# Chapter One Environment & Sustainability

*“With the climate crisis deepening, engagement within and around the global business community is critical. Profit and a sustainable planet are not mutually exclusive. C-suite leaders should prioritize driving organizations toward harmony with the natural world, workshopping solutions that will slow and even begin to reverse climate damage. Those modeling these practices today are charting the path forward across all sectors.”*

Nicole Grubner  
Partner





# Sustainability + Health Systems: US and EU Perspectives Health Systems Must Look in the Mirror

By: Nicole Grubner

While health systems ready themselves to address the emerging health challenges that are resulting from climate change — according to the [World Health Organization](#), “It is expected that climate change will lead to an additional 250,000 deaths each year between 2030 and 2050 from malnutrition, malaria, diarrhea and heat stress,” — they also have to take a close look in the mirror at their own environmental footprints.

The global healthcare industry is responsible for producing two gigatons of carbon dioxide each year, which amounts to [4.4% of net emissions worldwide](#). Hospitals generate about [five million tons of medical waste annually](#) from everyday trash such as medical packaging and food to regulated medical waste, surgical gowns, gloves, syringes, IV bags and more.

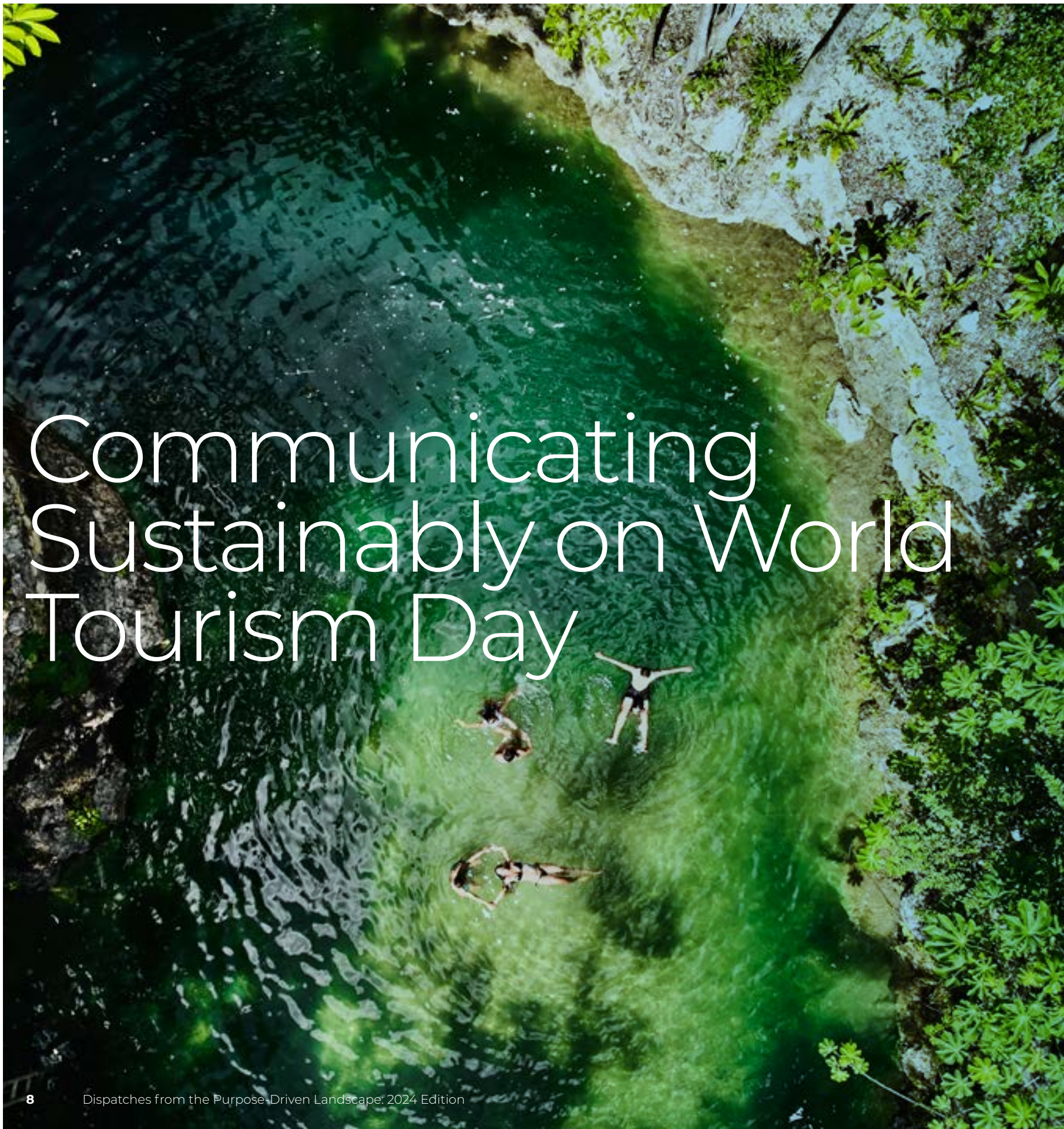
The recent panel discussion, “Sustainability + Health Systems,” [facilitated by mHealth Israel](#), brought together an impressive roster to discuss this issue. Panelists included:

- [Reed Omary, MD, MS](#), is the Carol D. & Henry P. Pendergrass Professor of Radiology and Biomedical Engineering at Vanderbilt University Medical Center (VUMC) with over 25 years as a practicing interventional radiologist. Dr. Omary stepped down from his position as Chair of Radiology to make a full career pivot towards sustainable healthcare to motivate U.S. healthcare to decarbonize operations and adopt sustainable practices. You can follow Dr. Omary’s blog on making healthcare more sustainable: [The Green Leap](#)

- [Elizabeth Morris, MD](#), is the Chair of the Department of Radiology at UC Davis Health, an institution with a history of commitment to sustainability. Dr. Morris approaches sustainability through the academic lens, exploring how to think holistically about planetary health within our healthcare system.
- [Bert Hartog](#), Interim VP of Sustainability & Transformation at The Digital Medicine Society (DiMe), a professional society for the digital medicine community that focuses on driving scientific progress and broad acceptance of digital medicine to enhance public health.
- [Philip Guster](#), Director of System Sustainability at Henry Ford Health. Guster previously worked at DTE Energy, which partnered with Henry Ford in 2021 to help the health system reduce its greenhouse gas emissions through DTE’s voluntary renewable energy program with the purchase of wind and solar energy at increasing rates over the years.

[View the full panel discussion:](#)





# Communicating Sustainably on World Tourism Day

By: Terri Bloore

**A** U.N. global assessment of progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) makes clear the important role that tourism must play in achieving the ambitious agenda for change. In particular, the sector has the potential to contribute to inclusive and sustainable economic growth, sustainable consumption and production (SCP) and the sustainable use of oceans and marine resources, respectively. Today, an [ESG strategy](#) is not simply nice to have.

The [sustainable travel market is expected to grow by \\$335.93 billion during 2022-2027](#), with a CAGR of 9.54 percent during the forecast period (*Research and Markets*). The consumer appetite is there—with over 80 percent of global travelers saying that sustainable tourism is important.

The tourism industry has a duty to communicate responsibly and set the tone for the sector. With increasingly tighter regulation, complex frameworks and investor demands, the bar is being driven ever higher. Meeting expectations has become ever more complex.





## Putting people, places, and the planet first

A [sustainable communications strategy](#) must be substantiated and rooted in the facts—putting people, places, and the planet first. What targets and metrics are set, what are the reporting frameworks that organizations adhere to, what stakeholders do they report to, what have they done so far, what is the roadmap? These questions must be answered before a tourism communications strategy can even begin to be created. The roadmap must be clear, objectives and targets measurable and commitments communicated so that they hold the sector to account.

## Not forgetting the ‘S’ in ESG

A ESG strategy must cover the three elements thoroughly and transparently. That is environment, social, and governance. The middle ‘S’ is often overlooked, but social aspects can be just as vital as the environment. Fundamental to all communications efforts is a narrative that reflects the corporate and business unit strategy. The narrative must enhance and raise awareness to key audiences with consistent messages. This can then be used and adapted for multiple stakeholders such as investors, eco-minded travelers, and those who are more price conscious.

Communication that is truly sustainable must adhere to the following framework:

- Ensure that messages reflect the strategic framework and business imperative
- Define what business priorities mean to individual stakeholder groups

- Be flexible and adaptable over time
- Illustrate commitments and impact with data-driven messages including proof points, data and examples
- Develop targeted messages that resonate with specific audiences including investors, talent and customers
- Tailor messages to resonate on various channels

## Avoiding the banana skins

The [tourism](#) and destination messages need to be honest and modest in tone, focusing on a realistic roadmap with clear and defined markers along the way. Grand sweeping statements that are not tied to measurable data is like walking on banana skins that set organizations up for more scrutiny and criticism than the industry would hand out if the tone was honest and modest in approach. Less is more in the [sustainable communications](#) game, so this means no sweeping statements, no sales slogans or ‘fluffy’ wording. Paid partnerships are also a no-go unless clearly disclosed and part of a wider drive to reinforce business, national, or international commitments.

In the lead-up to COP28, the sector should seize the opportunity and look at ways to lead the charge. The tourism industry has a responsibility to make a direct and indirect positive impact on the U.N.’s SDG’s, and communication is key.





# Doing and saying the right thing – the EU gets to grips with greenwashing and misleading claims

By: Carolina Gasparoli & Terri Bloore

In January, the European Parliament [approved](#) Empowering Consumers for the Green Transition Directive, with a strong majority. The new Directive sends an important signal to all organisations that are ramping up their green and environmental, [sustainability](#) and governance (ESG) credentials, by providing greater certainty for consumers in their interaction with brands.

Under the Directive, unfounded claims such as “environmentally friendly,” “natural,” “climate neutral,” “biodegradable,” or “eco-friendly” will be banned unless they can be proved. It also aims to enable consumers to make informed decisions about products and to contribute to a [circular economy](#), one of the pillars of the E.U. Green Deal. Environmental and social impact, durability, and repairability would be added to the list of product characteristics about which traders are forbidden to mislead consumers.





## A reputation risk that is increasingly becoming a legal issue

The E.U. Commission decided to act to stop companies from making false and unsubstantiated claims because it recognised that overall, there is a lot of interest from consumers in supporting greener production and consumption, as well as a willingness to pay more and reward companies that behave responsibly, but there is not enough trust in the claims and labels.

For example, [the Commission found](#) that 75% of consumers would consider buying green products, but only 17% actually go for products with green labels for various reasons, including trust. The Commission also conducted a [survey](#) with national consumer authorities about green claims online and found that in 42% of cases, claims were exaggerated, false or deceptive.

This sentiment is confirmed by a more recent [YouGov poll](#) published in February 2023: a majority of global respondents (60%) agree that they are sceptical about green claims made by brands, suggesting brands have work to do to gain their trust.

Greenwashing, when companies claim products, practices or credentials are more environmentally sustainable than they are, isn't just a reputational risk for brands. It increasingly becomes a legal risk. For example, in October 2023 the [Court in Berlin](#) prohibited HelloFresh from advertising itself as, "the first global climate-neutral cooking box company" and from claiming to offset 100% of its direct emissions through purchased rights, instead of actual CO2 reduction. In the U.K., the Competition and Markets Authority launched an [investigation](#) in January 2023 into ASOS, Boohoo and George at Asda about their fashion products, including clothing, footwear, and accessories.

The [Green Claims Directive](#), currently being discussed at committee stage in Parliament which will spell out the conditions for using environmental claims in greater detail. The Green Claims Directive will have to be approved before the E.U. general elections.

## A business opportunity to seize

Although the first reaction from many companies could be one of concern, this new legislation represents an opportunity for those players in the market who are already complying with the new rules.

The competitive advantages are huge, and it is the right time to position your company and products as key players, with significant rewards in terms of reputation as well as business profits. As public and legal scrutiny grows, companies must be prepared to [communicate their green and sustainability credentials](#) so they comply with new regulations. Although it is outside the single market, pressure is mounting in the U.K. to be more transparent and thoughtful as well. Those companies that are trading with the E.U. will have to comply with the Directives if they want to continue to do so.

Adopting a responsible and sustainable approach to business is no longer debatable—but with the bar being driven ever higher, meeting expectations becomes ever more complex.

FINN Partners' 10 top tips for [communicating sustainability](#) include being:

Sincere: communicating sustainability isn't about point-scoring or winning fans through virtue signalling. Audiences will see through ESG publicity stunts. A sustainability strategy must be about making real change.

Clear: sustainability can mean many things, and different things to different people. Avoid woolly promises, jargon, and non-specifics. Define the goals and the actions and be consistent in language.

Action-led: each communication should have a goal, for example to encourage customers to engage with a sustainability initiative to bring about actual change.

Informative: products or services with a genuine environmental benefit [appeal to an eco-conscious market](#), so do communicate sustainability but do it responsibly. Back up your ESG campaign with detailed information that explains your actions, their objectives, and the issues behind the actions.

For the full set of tips, [download our white paper](#).



# Intersection of public health and sustainability: Why it matters now more than ever

By: Aman Gupta

**H**ealthcare businesses of today face complex challenges ranging from stakeholder expectations to regulatory compliance. Amid these, sustainable development often takes a backseat. Sustainability may seem like a buzzword, used liberally with very little credibility. However, the concept is far more nuanced and important where public health is concerned. It is the cornerstone of success to build resilience and protect the planet.

Climate change is the worst crisis humanity is currently facing. The evidence is clear with the stark differences in climate-related incidents across the globe. While Dubai received torrential rainfall causing flash floods, people across various parts of Asia are grappling with heatwaves, leading to severe water shortages

with poorer communities being the worst affected. The Earth is boiling, quite literally, and resources have been stretched to the limit as the population grows, foreshadowing devastating consequences for future generations. Public health, in particular, is reeling from this crisis, as the prevalence of communicable and non-communicable diseases grows at a startling rate. Between 2000 and 2019, almost 489,000 people died each year due to heat-related illnesses, with 45% in Asia and 36% in Europe.<sup>[1]</sup> Rising temperatures are responsible for not just public health emergencies, they can affect healthcare services. Public healthcare is the first line of defense during a crisis of this magnitude, and as systems across the globe struggle to cope, the outlook seems bleak.





Disease prevention, treatment, accessibility, equity, and protection of the environment are all essential facets of healthcare that aim to enhance the well-being of the public. The main goal of sustainability is to meet the needs of the current generation without compromising the needs of future generations. The crux of both these concepts is the adoption of holistic practices that provide long-term welfare over short-term respite. Hence, it is crucial to understand how healthcare and sustainability go hand in hand to help humanity weather the current crisis.

## Making healthcare sustainable

The healthcare sector is responsible for between 4.4% and 5.2% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>[2]</sup> This creates a paradoxical situation wherein the systems created to help can harm the well-being of the public. Healthcare services comprise energy-intensive activities, from maintaining hospitals to creating life-saving medicines. Reducing the carbon footprint would be the first step towards making healthcare sustainable. The solutions to this problem boil down to three categories; switching to non-fossil energy, storing energy, and conserving energy. Rather than solely depending on non-renewable sources of energy, the sector must start adopting renewable sources such as wind or solar energy. This helps build resilience to adverse climate-related events and can provide a positive socioeconomic impact.

A critical aspect of healthcare that is often overlooked is the significance of preventive care. Countries which are a part of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development spend less than 3% on preventive care.<sup>[3]</sup> Prevention is important in reducing the overuse of resources in healthcare, which can result in reducing the carbon footprint. Several short-and long-term sustainability goals can be achieved through primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention. A robust global vaccination programme must be implemented to decrease resource consumption. Furthermore, encouraging the public to adopt a healthy lifestyle empowers them to take an active role in enhancing their well-being.

Public healthcare is often highly fragmented as patients may have to go to several points along the treatment pathway. Improving access to early diagnosis and providing one-stop solutions can make this process easier and more sustainable. Policymakers and other stakeholders can drive systemic change by encouraging people to adopt preventive measures to reduce the disease burden and healthcare consumption.

There are several indirect ways in which healthcare can become more sustainable. For instance, encouraging the adoption of telemedicine in cases where the patient does not need to be physically present. Governments must create policies that encourage the sustainable procurement of ingredients for medicines, using greener methods of

transportation, embracing a circular economy, and employing safe waste disposal methods.

Public healthcare and sustainability have a symbiotic relationship that requires our utmost attention. COVID-19 may not be the last health crisis we witness in our lifetimes. This is especially true due to climate change, which can exacerbate more than half of the known human pathogenic diseases.<sup>[4]</sup> As healthcare communicators our task is twofold—drawing attention to the brewing health crisis while shedding light on climate change and its implications. The future hinges on sustainability and integrating it into the healthcare system while not compromising on quality. The transition needs to start now.

[1] <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/climate-change-heat-and-health>

[2] <https://magazine.hms.harvard.edu/articles/confronting-health-cares-carbon-footprint#:~:text=Data%20suggest%20that%20the%20global,contribute%20%20to%205%20percent.>

[3] <https://www.oecd.org/newsroom/boosting-investment-in-health-systems-will-be-essential-to-deal-with-future-shocks.htm>

[4] <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41558-022-01426-1>







# We Are Running Out of Time to Save the Planet. **Act Now!**

To those who suggest addressing climate change competes with other societal priorities, remember none can be resolved without managing the climate crisis.

By: Aman Gupta

**S**ustainability is at the core of every business now, and rightly so. Soaring temperatures and changing weather patterns are sounding the alarm bells for immediate action. In a recent exchange with a friend from Dubai, I was astonished when they shared a video of a sofa kept on the balcony of a high-rise being swept away in heavy rainfall. Assuming it was footage from a past cyclone, I was taken aback to learn it was indeed from Dubai. Intrigued, I delved deeper into the topic and found out that the unprecedented rainfall was not the result of a cyclone, but rather a consequence of a regular weather system exacerbated by climate change. This incident underscores the pressing reality highlighted by climate scientists: the surge in global temperatures, largely driven by human activity, is fuelling a rise in extreme weather events worldwide, including intensified rainfall.[i]

While the Dubai incident might seem far from home, the problem is much closer. In Bengaluru, the Indian headquarters for various multinational companies, extreme summer conditions in March and April have led to severe water scarcity. Over the recent years, Bengaluru has experienced minimal rainfall, attributable to human-induced climate change. This scarcity has led to critically low water levels, especially in impoverished regions, dramatically driving up water expenses and rapidly depleting the available supply.[ii] According to city authorities, 6,900 out of 13,900 borewells have become dry, despite some having been drilled to depths of 1,500 ft.[iii] These situations underline the urgent need to address climate change for human, animal, and planet health.



## Worsening climate challenges

Recently, the Executive Secretary of U.N. Climate Change, Simon Stiell, presented a roadmap ahead of COP30, titled, “Two years to save the world.” In his address, he listed why the next two years are critical for our planet’s preservation. Firstly, he said the urgency is evident with unprecedented heatwaves and economic devastation demanding comprehensive action.

Secondly, he said we are entering a race to determine leaders in the new clean energy economy. With the global index of living standards in constant flux, each country’s climate responses will be key to whether they rise up the ladder or fall. Thirdly, many countries require substantial climate financing to enact robust climate plans. Fourthly, the effectiveness of the Paris Agreement is under scrutiny, as current national climate plans fall short of significant emissions reduction. The national climate plans—called Nationally Determined Contributions or NDCs—in aggregate will barely cut emissions by 2030. There is still a chance to make greenhouse gas emissions tumble with a new generation of national climate plans. Lastly, G20 leadership is pivotal, given their substantial emissions share, echoing their role in addressing global crises like the financial meltdown. He also mentioned that every individual’s contribution is vital in this transition, necessitating collective engagement now more than ever.[iv]

Therefore, to those who argue that addressing climate change competes with other vital priorities such as poverty alleviation, hunger eradication, pandemic control, or education enhancement, it is important to understand that none can be achieved without effectively managing the climate crisis.

## Sustainable Practices

The imperative for adopting sustainable practices to combat climate change is indisputable. Our current consumption and production patterns are placing unprecedented strain on the planet’s ecosystems, depleting natural resources at an alarming rate.

Adopting sustainable practices is essential to preserve biodiversity, protect vital ecosystems, and ensure the planet’s long-term health. Moreover, by embracing sustainable practices, we can mitigate the impacts of climate change, build resilience in vulnerable communities, and safeguard the wellbeing of current and future generations.

Furthermore, transitioning to sustainable energy sources such as renewable energy and improving energy efficiency reduces greenhouse gas emissions, fosters economic growth, and creates jobs in emerging industries. Here are some ways of adopting climate-resilient practices:

- **Renewable energy:** Transitioning from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources marks a pivotal shift in our energy paradigm, offering multifaceted benefits beyond reducing carbon emissions. Embracing renewable energy sources such as solar, wind, and hydroelectric power mitigates climate change by curbing greenhouse gas emissions and catalyzes positive transformations across environmental, social, and economic dimensions.
- **Energy efficiency:** Energy efficiency measures contribute to environmental sustainability by reducing carbon emissions, air and water pollution, and resource depletion. By decreasing energy consumption, industries and buildings can lower their carbon footprint and mitigate their impact on local and global ecosystems. Furthermore, energy-efficient transportation options, such as electric vehicles and public transit systems, reduce air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, improving air quality and public health.
- **Sustainable agriculture:** Adopting sustainable agricultural practices offers a multifaceted approach to mitigating the environmental impact associated with conventional farming methods. Such practices prioritize the preservation and restoration of natural ecosystems, including forests. Instead of



clearing land for agricultural expansion, sustainable farming methods promote land-use practices that maintain forest cover, such as agroforestry systems that integrate trees with crops and livestock.

- **Circular economy:** In a circular economy, products and materials are designed to be reused, repaired, or recycled rather than disposed of after a single use. This reduces the need for raw material extraction, which is often energy-intensive and associated with greenhouse gas emissions. Recycling and reusing materials requires less energy compared to producing new materials from scratch. For example, recycling aluminum requires significantly less energy than extracting and refining virgin aluminum ore. Similarly, remanufacturing products or components consumes less energy than manufacturing new ones.
- **Nature-based solutions:** Protecting and restoring ecosystems like forests, wetlands, and mangroves can sequester carbon dioxide and enhance resilience to climate change impacts.
- **Innovative technologies:** Supporting research and development of innovative technologies such as advanced batteries, green hydrogen, and carbon-neutral fuels can accelerate the transition to a low-carbon economy.

- **Climate resilience:** Building resilience to climate change through infrastructure upgrades, disaster preparedness, and community adaptation measures is essential for safeguarding vulnerable populations and ecosystems.

Enacting policies that incentivize sustainable practices, price carbon emissions, and promote international cooperation can also help mitigate the impacts of climate change. As healthcare communicators, we are responsible for sounding the alarm bells loud and clear. We need to shine the spotlight on the urgency to battle this worsening crisis. By embracing sustainable practices and fostering innovation across sectors, we can fight the battle against climate change and build a more sustainable and resilient future for all.

[i] <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/what-caused-storm-that-brought-dubai-standstill-2024-04-17/>

[ii] <https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2024/3/22/indias-bengaluru-fast-running-out-of-water-and-its-not-summer-yet#:~:text=In%20the%20last%20few%20years,and%20a%20quickly%20dwindling%20supply.>

[iii] <https://apnews.com/article/bengaluru-water-crisis-climate-change-india-17554235dba0741a266f2251b91aec8f>

[iv] <https://unfccc.int/news/two-years-to-save-the-world-simon-stiell-at-chatham-house>





# Navigating the Anthropocene: A Deep Dive into Our Climate Conundrum

By: Christopher Nial

**I**t is easy to marvel at the constancy of change on our blue planet, a testament to its adaptability, evolutionary prowess, and awe-inspiring resilience. Yet, as we stand on the precipice of the future, peering into the maw of the Anthropocene (the period during which human activity has been the dominant influence), the resilience of our world has never seemed so fragile, its capacity for self-regulation so strained. In the face of the climate crisis—the existential struggle of our time—we are forced to ask, “Are we the architects of our own dilemma?”

A casual stroll through Earth’s [climate archives](#)—tucked away in ice cores, tree rings, and sediment layers – unveils a rich tapestry of natural temperature oscillations. And yet, a stark anomaly emerges as we reach the epoch of the [industrial revolution](#). The emergence of this fossil fuel-driven society coincided with an abrupt upward jolt in the Earth’s temperature, a trend that continues today.

The [voracious consumption](#) of fossil fuels, triggered by our industrial endeavors, resulted in an unprecedented outpouring of carbon dioxide into our atmosphere. Agriculture and deforestation, the twin pillars of our civilization’s expansion, have served as the feeding grounds for another climatic malefactor – [methane](#).

In moderation, greenhouse gasses like carbon dioxide and methane are life’s [best friends](#). Their heat-trapping properties maintain Earth’s temperature at a life-sustaining level. Yet, the prodigious rise in their concentration, a by-product of our anthropogenic exploits, has spun this narrative on its head. The result is an overheating planet, a clear and alarming manifestation of global warming.

The question inevitably arises: aren’t these changes simply the Earth’s natural climate rhythms at work? While it’s true that natural phenomena such as solar radiation and volcanic activities do exert an influence on our planet’s climate, the exceptional speed and scale of the current warming trend points to an unusual suspect; us.

The overwhelming [consensus](#) within the scientific community underscores this very point. While the Earth’s climate has always experienced shifts and turns, the rapidity and magnitude of the present warming phase are far beyond natural factors’ remit.

Unraveling this entanglement of natural and anthropogenic influences on our planet’s climate is daunting, made more urgent by the grim portents of unchecked global warming. As we witness heatwaves growing in intensity and frequency, precipitation patterns skewing toward extremes, sea levels creeping higher, and the chemistry of our oceans shifting towards acidity, the urgency of our predicament becomes painfully clear.

The onus is on us to mitigate the relentless march of global warming by reining in our greenhouse gas emissions through greener energy and sustainable practices. Simultaneously, we must prepare for the changes already underway by adapting our infrastructure, policies, and ways of life.

As we teeter on the edge of the Anthropocene epoch, the threads of climate change offer a sobering reflection on the state of our world—a stark reminder of the consequences of our collective actions. But they also present an opportunity to harness human ingenuity and alter the course of our planetary story. The future of our warming world reflects scientific predictions and the potential for human agency to effect a change. The question is: will we seize this opportunity in time?





# Defining Sustainable Strategies

## Creating a Clear Sustainability Lexicon

By: Terri Bloore

**We** know that sustainability is no longer a nice to have, it is a business imperative. Yet there is still a lack of clarity around what the terms actually mean and their role.

With increasing regulation, investor demand and consumer awareness the correct usage of the terminology is vital. The lexicon of sustainability is increasingly complex so we will keep it brief.

### **Does ESG mean sustainability, CSR or SDGs?**

ESG specifically refers to the environmental, social and governance performance of a company. It is all-encompassing and doesn't simply focus on the sustainability efforts or environmental impact of the firm. These are used as a measurement tool.

The U.N. SDGs are much broader on the other hand. They are a set of 17 goals adopted by the U.N. in 2015 to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity for all. ESG factors are a part of this and used to measure the sustainability and responsibility practices of companies.

The SDGs and ESG factors are closely related. Many of the SDGs can be achieved through ESG practices, such as reducing carbon emissions, improving working conditions, and promoting diversity and inclusion. In turn, ESG investing can help to accelerate the achievement of the SDGs.

Corporate Social Responsibility or CSR, is more focused on the strategies carried out by the company to carry out its business in an ethical way. These include environmental, philanthropic, ethical, and economic responsibility.

The role, focus and purpose of the above are clear but indeed there is overlap. These needs to be in balance else the strategy is not sustainable, in

the truest sense of the word. The opaqueness can lead to confusion at best, and heavy fines and consumer distrust at worst.

### **So do you actually need to care?**

Well, yes. Aside from a company's image and reputation, there are huge fines for not adhering to the principles. [Studies show](#) that over 50% of environmental claims are vague, misleading or unfounded. Under new E.U. rules, companies would have their green claims verified before using them in advertising — with fines of up to 4% of annual turnover for those that fail to comply.

The [E.U. Green Claims Directive](#) means that companies have to seriously consider how they advertise products as sustainable. Terms such as “biodegradable,” “less polluting,” and “water saving” for instance would have to be supported with evidence that verifies claims.

This is building on current regulation [European Green Deal](#) and [‘Fit for 55’ package](#) and up and coming E.U. Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD). The Directives aim to ensure that large EU companies are more open about their sustainability information and efforts.

Companies that are proactive about environmental mandates and clearly communicate their goals, strategies and measurement tools not only secure their future but also open the door to potential new growth opportunities, attracting consumers, partners and investors.

The latest round of E.U. regulation offers the opportunity to spark a conversation in businesses and educate stakeholders on sustainable claims. There is a lot of opportunity for companies that get it right.





## Solutions-Oriented Communications Can Extinguish Climate Anxiety

By: Nicole Grubner

**In** the summer of 2019, the Amazon rainforest was ravaged by fires. They happen yearly—most often started purposely for cattle ranching and growing cash crops. Fires in the Amazon are not uncommon, but this time, the news spread almost as quickly as the flames.

- [Amazon rainforest fires: global leaders urged to divert Brazil from 'suicide' path](#)
- [Blame humans for starting the Amazon fires, environmentalists say](#)
- [Amazon fires: deforestation has a devastating heating impact on the local climate — new study](#)
- [In NASA animation, Amazon fires turn the atmosphere from green to red with carbon monoxide.](#)
- [Amazon fires 'extraordinarily concerning,' warns UN biodiversity chief.](#)

This news and the endless doom-and-gloom headlines stressed me out. I was struck with sheer panic. “If the rainforest burns, we won’t have enough oxygen to live! We are going to suffocate. Tomorrow.” As it turns out, that is a relatively common response.

I learned that what I was experiencing was climate anxiety. Anthony Leiserowitz, the Founder and Director of the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication and a Senior Research Scientist at Yale School of the Environment, [describes climate anxiety](#) as “distress about climate change and its impacts on the landscape and human existence.” This response has become commonplace. Therapists are reporting clients coming in and sharing their climate-related fears more frequently.





In the first large-scale investigation published by The Lancet on climate anxiety, researchers surveyed 10,000 children and young people aged 16–25 across 10 countries, [finding](#):

**59%+** were very apprehensive about climate change.

**84%+** were at least moderately worried about climate change.

**50%+** reported feeling sad, anxious, angry, powerless, helpless, and guilty.

**45%+** said their feelings about climate change negatively affected their daily life and functioning.

**75%+** said that they think the future is frightening.

**83%+** said that they think people have failed to take care of the planet.

### Stoking the Flames of Climate Anxiety: The 24-hour News Cycle

How could we blame the public for feeling this way? We are inundated with headlines about being on the brink of a climate disaster. The polar ice caps are melting! Pakistan has the worst heatwave in its history! South Africa has no water! Texas is frozen over!

The 24-hour news cycle and the hyperbolic posting and resharing of these headlines across social media only fuel the eco-anxiety fire millions experience as they read about the cataclysmic future that is supposedly in store.

Headlines can be cruel, though sometimes this is intentional. Stoking fear can catalyze action. Our survival instincts kick in. People take to the streets to demand more from governments and business leaders.

But is there a better way to catalyze action than through anxiety and fear?

### Responding to Climate Anxiety

Like coping with any form of anxiety, people respond in different ways. Some responses are “adaptive” or healthy, while some people may resort to maladaptive coping mechanisms:

**Denial and avoidance:** Some individuals may cope with climate anxiety by denying or minimizing the severity of the issue, avoiding engaging with information or discussions related to climate change, or choosing to ignore or dismiss the problem altogether.

**Escapism and disengagement:** Many will seek temporary escape through distractions instead of confronting climate anxiety. This can involve excessive consumption of entertainment or social media.

**Nihilism and hopelessness:** Climate anxiety can make some individuals feel overwhelmed or hopeless. They may adopt a nihilistic perspective, believing that nothing they do can make a difference in the face of such a massive global challenge.

**Blaming and scapegoating:** Rather than taking

personal responsibility or seeking collective solutions, some may blame others or specific groups for the climate crisis: corporations, politicians, or individuals from different regions or lifestyles.

While these can provide temporary relief, we could find a more productive, less harmful approach. These feelings of apathy, anger, denial, or sorrow can stunt our appetite for meaningful activism, hinder personal and collective action, and perpetuate a lack of awareness and urgency.

### The Antidote: Solutions-Oriented Communications

Communicators have a crucial role to play. Media, corporate spokespeople, government representatives, analysts, academics, educators, and even the individuals posting on their Twitter profiles all have a role. Communicators educate the public — from family and community members to decision-making stakeholders — on the causes and impacts of climate change.

What happens if we focus only on educating and raising awareness of impact? Without offering solutions, climate anxiety kicks in. We can change this narrative.

Instead of headlines that stoke fear, reporting on climate change can become solutions-oriented. Rather than proclaiming that we are past the point of no return, we can tell stories about innovators and companies deploying solutions. By incorporating solutions-oriented messaging into any account focused on climate change,


communicators can help people better understand the issues and feel empowered to act.

What this action looks like can vary from individual to organization. Individuals may adopt sustainable practices into daily routines: reducing energy consumption, recycling, using public transportation, choosing products using sustainable materials, eating a plant-based diet, or composting.

On a larger scale, business leaders and decision-makers who receive these solutions-oriented messages become aware of how they can make a positive change. They become champions of sustainability and environmental conscientiousness within their organizations. They push to advance sustainable business practices and processes, charting paths to transition to renewable energy sources, circular business models, and waste reduction efforts.

By educating beyond the challenges and raising awareness of the solutions, communicators can play a key role in alleviating climate anxiety. Solutions-oriented communication can foster hope and a sense of collective responsibility for the future while inspiring action with the innovative solutions that exist and that are being developed to solve our most significant climate challenges.





# Chapter Two Organizational Reputation

*“There’s no way around it: regardless of industry sector, brand purpose and organizational reputation is top-of-mind for conscientious C-suite executives across the globe. The link between purpose and profit is clear, and organizational reputation as a main consideration when making critical decisions represents a tremendous opportunity to make the world a better place while building sustainable business. It doesn’t have to be one or the other.”*

Terri Bloore  
Senior Partner





# War and Purpose — Building Brands for a Sustainable Future

## Rattling Sabres and Taking Up the Call of Social Impact

By: Gil Bashe

**B**usiness is war. It began in the 1980s, when the allegory of marketing as warfare first became popular, largely due to positioning strategists [Al Ries](#) and [Jack Trout](#).

The duo penned several bestselling business books, [Differentiate or Die: Survival in Our Era of Killer Competition](#), [Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind](#) and [Marketing Warfare](#) that defined the brand-building approach of a generation. As pioneering “[market warfare strategists](#),” they advised leaders to identify and attack their opponents’ weaknesses. According to Ries and Trout:

“...marketing is warfare, the competition are the enemy and the prize is the money consumers are willing to pay for your products or services. Marketing is a conflict between corporations to satisfy human needs and wants.”

Their metaphors of battling for market share became integral to the language marketers used to show the C-suite they were out for blood. Marketers were commanders moving soldiers — the sales force — into battle to win business and destroy the competition.

### Marketing and Warfare—Do They Have Anything in Common?

You may wonder what they were thinking when you view Trout’s and Reis’s decade-defining marketing metaphor from the distance of a few decades. Marketing is **not** warfare. War is destruction. War is horror. It is a battle for survival, not market share; marketers on the road sleep in hotels, not in foxholes. If they fail in their mission,

they may lose an account or at worst, their jobs — not their lives. Gaining brand share is not a life-or-death struggle: at least, it shouldn’t be.

My war experiences as a paratrooper and combat medic reinforce that marketing and warfare have little in common. I learned many positive values in the military that I carry forward. I am loyal and compassionate. When needed, I find the courage to take risks. I learned organization and looked to build group camaraderie. While these skills are transferable to business, warriors and marketers accept very different missions and see very different things.

In war, I saw people struggle for their lives. I saw refugees flee conflict with bundles and babies on their backs. At home, I saw painful losses forever change the lives of families. Those painful experiences taught me how integral it is to who we are as humans that we build community, resolve conflict, and sustain and save life through our actions. I see the importance of contributing to the good of society and recognize that acting with purpose is the worthiest of goals, not only in our personal lives but in our business dealings.

### People Have Been Slaying Each Other for Millennia—But That’s Not What Good Business Is About

It became clear to me — as has become clear to many business leaders — that acting to destroy the competition and be #1 in sales constantly is unsustainable. Long-term business success is tied to acting with purpose.

Why did Reis and Trout choose to tie marketing to achieve brand dominance to military strategy? They both served in the military; Reis was in the





merchant marine post-World War II and later served with the U.S. Army in Korea, and Trout was a Navy flight navigator. As was typical for those who came of age during WWII, they likely saw the world through the experiences of the heroic “Greatest Generation” that stormed Fortress Europe and Imperial Japan.

Maybe they saw any enterprise worth doing as analogous to their service. Perhaps they saw the approach as a shorthand to draw their peers into thinking more analytically and seriously about marketing; after all, marketing as a discipline was only a few decades old at that point. They encouraged other marketers to draw on the imaginative power of Sun Tzu’s 2,500-year treatise [The Art of War](#) and [On War](#) author [Karl von Clausewitz’s](#) operational rigor. They wanted fellow practitioners to hone their strategic thinking and recognize that brand dominance was won or lost through positioning.

#### **Retire Military Jargon for Purpose**

But one can think analytically about business without making it a blood sport. There are countless analogies comparing marketing to warfare: field intelligence is market research. Sales talks to Communications about providing air cover for integrated marketing campaigns. Enlisting the support of market influencers allows social media marketers to secure the high ground.

#### **While the Word Analogies are Endless, the Actual Comparisons are Few**

Trout and Reis were often talking about “the moment.” They were part of a mindset that valued quarterly gains to the exclusion of sustained success. Their analogies suited a business mindset that persists to this day: make money fast and then get out, gliding serenely into early retirement on the canopy of your golden parachute.

But business leaders who take this approach are less like business leaders and more like pirates. Sustained success in business calls for a more

practical, cooperative, collaborative approach that views business challenges as sector-wide opportunities to improve customers’ lives while making long-term profits. Running a business with purpose is about building relationships with customers that last a lifetime, based on shared values and a positive view of company practices, actions and societal benefits.

Companies may choose to mobilize their communities to work hard and play nice, using their corporate logo to rally Gen Z and Generation Alpha around social purpose. Brands can inspire and support values and ideas consistent with great societal ideals. They must also realize it’s smarter and more financially sustainable to take this approach and avoid fueling the endless antagonism of corporate conflict.

Ries’s and Trout’s achievement wasn’t small; they elevated marketing to a new, more respected role in the corporate structure. They helped define the practice as a strategic function guiding people and resources to higher performance levels. Revenue remains all-important for sustainable companies to invest in their futures. Still, perhaps it’s time to recognize the value companies that embrace purpose-based marketing bring to their stakeholders and customers, especially those in the generation that is rightfully frightened of and tired of wars.

Marketing success is not about playing the game to win at all times; it’s about playing it well. It’s time to retire comparisons to war and for marketing to take up a newer, nobler mission. We have entered an era in brand positioning when companies are invited to express their voice in support of social impact issues that speak to the heart and interests of their business ecosystem — their employees, customers, shareholders and market influencers. Let’s find a language that speaks more to purpose than to power.



# The Secret to Transforming Workplace Culture? Better Middle Managers

*The leaders fostering agency talent are in need of more support and resources*

By: Betsy Henning

**M**iddle managers are the key to healthier, more connected and more [productive workplaces](#), as well as more satisfied employees—the kind who stay with an organization to grow their careers.

No one at marketing and creative agencies uses the term “middle managers.” However, the director-level creatives and account leads who occupy the layers between executives and individual contributors are in the middle.

Agencies are known for their high-stress, high-turnover environments and the folks in the middle,

specifically, have especially hard roles. They must mind the billable hours, client expectations and work quality of their teams, while also contributing themselves. They’re pressured to ensure employees have five-star satisfaction with work at a time when employees’ mental health challenges are high.

The superhuman who can manage all of that successfully is rare. Here’s how leadership can provide support and recognition to the people leaders who are fostering talent for companies today.

## **Elevated but not supported**

Research backs up the importance of middle managers—particularly to employees. “Relationships with management, in particular,

account for 86% of workers’ satisfaction with their interpersonal ties at work,” according to research on bosses from [McKinsey & Company](#). The 2023 Gallup [State of the Global Workplace Report](#) concluded that the number one thing companies can do to improve employee productivity is “give them a better manager.”

Many organizations, agencies included, are missing the mark when it comes to support. In a McKinsey report, just [20% of managers](#) “strongly agree that their organizations help them be successful people managers.”

Often elevated from the ranks of individual contributors into an oversight role, they typically get zero training to help with the transition. They



aren't seen as a distinct employee cohort requiring specialized communications, support or recognition.

### **Pave their path to success**

The first thing is to recognize the importance of these employees to the health of your organization and then create the conditions for them to succeed. Here are a few ways for CEOs and CMOs to grow their middle managers' potential.

**Include middle managers in overall comms planning:** This includes strategy updates, significant client acquisitions, CEO changes, reorgs and so on. With any major announcement, it's your people leaders who need to translate the news for their teams and give them more details. Don't leave them to echo high-level messages.

Before or after any major announcement, help them anticipate employee questions and give them real information, additional talking points or materials to share with employees.

**Support their well-being:** Positive, healthy managers will manage people better. If your managers are always working late to meet deadlines, flying off the handle or don't have time to do their jobs, they can't show up for their teams.

Ask them what they need. Consider extra benefits for managers. Remind them regularly that their well-being matters and make them feel valued.

**Invest in first-time managers:** With a few exceptions, great managers are made, not born. Give young managers a management mentor. The real value is in managers helping managers through open, trusting conversations.

**Provide training and resources:** Develop a regular communications series or training program where managers come together to share and learn. Managers need more than videos. They need active workshops, tool kits and other opportunities

to focus on the people-management side of their jobs.

**Include middle managers in the employee feedback loop:** If you want to get the pulse on the culture of an organization, look to them. They have their ears closer to the ground. Give them an opportunity to share their perspectives on how employees are faring. Plus, asking for their input makes them feel valued and valuable in their roles.

**Provide tools for onboarding new employees:** A critical part of any retention strategy is giving new hires a seamless, positive onboarding experience. Managers are the most important people in making that process successful. Give them an onboarding guide that charts the communications flow, provides a guide to building team connections and more.

**Reward positive attitudes:** Identify the human qualities you expect managers to uphold. A great manager is a positive coach. Put these qualities in their job description. Create manager recognition programs for those who exemplify these values.

**Give managers time to manage people:** "Companies treat middle management as a catchall," McKinsey says, "requiring managers to spend much of their time handling non-managerial work and navigating organizational bureaucracy, rather than allowing them to focus on the most important role at an organization: fostering talent."


Investing in people leaders has a positive multiplier effect on the culture of your entire organization. Taking time to understand what middle managers need, helping them develop positive relationships and addressing their challenges can have a big impact on your company culture. High-quality middle managers are the secret to making workplaces feel and function a whole lot better.





# Why The Current (And Poor) Employee Engagement Landscape Could Be A Good Thing

By: Betsy Henning



Let's get some bad news out of the way. Worker mental health is suffering, with 91% of Gen Z workers feeling "stressed," according to a **recent survey**. Top talent is hard to keep, given that the latest jobs report puts the unemployment rate at 4.1%. Economic uncertainty adds constant pressure to, well, everyone.





So it's no wonder that when it comes to employee engagement, talent leaders often feel lost. They've been tasked with navigating through a vast and unfamiliar employment wilderness with little more than a broken compass and an outdated employee engagement playbook.

Being lost is stressful and bewildering. But there's an upside to the unknown: Calamity creates the conditions that can lead to meaningful and lasting cultural transformation. Visionary leaders now can rethink the standard-issue employee engagement programs, infusing them with fresh ideas, new tools and new ways of working.

If you're serious about improving your employee engagement efforts, consider implementing these seven steps. They're designed to help you build a stronger workplace—and find and keep the top talent you need.

**Revisit your purpose, mission, vision, and values.** When people are lost, they reflect on their relationships, reconsider their choices and ask themselves, *why am I doing what I'm doing?* That's what workers did during the pandemic, and the result was the Great Resignation. Companies would do well to do the same. Ask whether your purpose still holds. Does it speak to the heart of your workforce? Does your employer value proposition address what workers need today?

**Put your values into action for employees.** Good intentions won't help you find your way out of the wilderness. According to a **recent Qualtrics report**, employees who feel that an organization

embodies its values are “27% more likely to have higher engagement scores, and 23% more likely to stay working for more than three years.” Regularly communicate to employees how your values drive business decisions, and you'll be building a culture of accountability and trust.

**Find new allies in your company.**

Working together improves your chances of finding your way through tough circumstances. Look for people who share your passion for making the workplace better for employees. Break down old company silos. Disband “this is just how we do things” thinking. Bring brand, communications, marketing, and human resources together, and you'll have a powerhouse team. That's a lot of synergy, energy, and ideas you can bring to bear for your company's most important audience: your workforce.

**Remind employees how and why their roles matter.** People who are lost need leaders they can trust. Especially during times of instability, your employees want the same. But communication is a persistent weak spot for many companies. According to a **recent Axios report**, “77% of leaders think the communications they share have the context employees need to do their jobs well. Only 46% of employees agree.”

**Experiment and innovate.** Sometimes, finding your way again requires more than a simple reorientation. Survival may require deliberate ingenuity and creativity—exactly the kind of culture that companies engender in R&D but rarely

in HR. Exercising curiosity about how to engage your workforce may create revolutionary changes that revitalize your business in unexpected ways.

**Build a case for investing in employee engagement programs.**

Emergency rescues require resources. When the business and the world are humming along, it can be hard to win new investments for engagement programs. But now that employees are hard to keep, which adds recruiting and retention costs to the balance sheets, you've got a clear and measurable business challenge to solve. Odds are good that the numbers will be there to back up an investment in talent.

**Make sure your tech stack makes work and work life better.**

In the rush to build efficient, digital-first companies, many organizations inadvertently created more inefficiency—and more headaches for workers. “More than a third (38%) of employees are experiencing symptoms of burnout,” according to Qualtrics. “This year, the top driver of burnout is ineffective processes and systems.”

None of this is easy of course. But now is the time to change your perspective and build a new plan. Then you'll be on your way to creating the workplace of the future. One that meets workers where they are today—and will be ready for whatever the world throws at us next.





# Avoid Greenwashing and Green Hushing: Unlock the Real Value of PR to Drive and Practice Sustainability Communication

The concepts of green initiatives and sustainable development have become deeply entrenched in our collective consciousness, widely acknowledged, and adopted as fundamental pillars of modern business operations. They are likely to ring a bell for anyone with even a modest grasp of social and economic fundamentals. In today's [corporate communication](#) landscape, it's rare to find a company that hasn't incorporated

sustainable development into its core values or hasn't promoted environmental responsibility. However, the depth of understanding and actual dedication to sustainable development varies among businesses. The key question remains: Do companies genuinely comprehend sustainable development, make practical effort toward a greener future, and integrate sustainability goals into their mission and business strategies?

By: Jason Cao

To truly become a company that practices sustainable development, it's crucial for business leaders to have a clear understanding of this concept. Misinterpretations can lead to practices such as greenwashing and green hushing, two polarized approaches that can hinder genuine progress.

The term "greenwashing," coined by New York environmentalist Jay Westerveld in 1986, refers to the deceptive practice of promoting environmental initiatives for profit-driven purposes while not genuinely committing to them. In simpler terms, it involves saying more than doing when it comes to environmental protection. Greenwashing not only reduces consumer trust when exposed but also erodes confidence in sustainability declarations made by all companies, potentially putting genuinely sustainable businesses at risk.

As Pascal Canfin, chairman of the European Parliament's Environment Committee, rightly points out, consumers aspire to adopt more sustainable lifestyles, but they often have difficulty in discerning what is truly sustainable. Unfortunately, more and more companies and organizations are misusing

terms like sustainability and social responsibility, thereby eroding trust in achieving the real Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This is the real cost of greenwashing: a society that lacks trust can rapidly deplete our natural resources and jeopardize living conditions for future generations.

Interestingly, a study by South Pole, a Swiss carbon consultancy, reveals another aspect of this problem. The study involved 1,220 large companies in 12 developed countries. Surprisingly, [23% of these companies had set science-based emissions reduction targets but were reluctant to publicize their goals and plans](#). This behavior is the direct opposite of "greenwashing" and is known as "green hushing."

The term "greenwashing" refers to the misleading promotion of behaviors or products that do not meet appropriate standards for being environmentally friendly. In contrast, "green hushing" refers to companies that set sustainability goals but hide them from the public. Unlike the expression, "doing good without asking for it," in the corporate sphere, concealing sustainability efforts is far from a good deed. Combating climate change requires a concerted

effort from all stakeholders. If companies do not disclose their emission reduction targets and achievements, it will not only complicate audits, it will hinder the exchange of emission reduction methods, which may lead to missed opportunities for collaborative emission reduction.

Both greenwashing and green hushing represent extreme approaches to sustainable development communication. While greenwashing was more prevalent in the early days of climate awareness due to lax regulations, it is gradually being replaced by green hushing as companies face scrutiny. [To address climate change effectively](#), we need not only clear goals and innovative solutions but also transparency and confidence in our efforts, as progress cannot happen in silence.

Since the path to sustainable development is fraught with challenges, how can companies effectively share their unique strengths with the public in a timely and appropriate manner? I believe the answer lies in returning to the fundamental question of why a company exists and its ultimate purpose—its *Purpose*. In recent years, this concept has gained widespread recognition and popularity in western corporate





management. It operates on a level higher than a company's vision or long-term goals and answers the fundamental questions about a company's essence.

**By standing on this foundational basis, Purpose guides a company in understanding its core principles and values, as well as the dynamic relationships it has with internal and external stakeholders.**

When we look at the 17 specific SDGs set by the U.N. to address environmental, economic, and social issues, they all revolve around the most crucial aspects: *People, Prosperity, Planet, Peace*, and *Partnership*—commonly known as the 5Ps. These five domains are interrelated and form a cycle of cause and effect. They represent the essence of sustainable development, guiding and inspiring every organization to actively participate and contribute from its own perspective.

As a company's *Purpose* reflects its reason for existence and serves as the foundation for its actions, it should be at the core of sustainable development communication. Greenwashing and green hushing are merely tactical approaches, while the key is to deeply integrate a company's mission, values, and core strategies with its unique business ecosystem at the philosophical and strategic levels. This integration is crucial in finding the most suitable path for a company's sustainable development journey.

At FINN Partners, we pride ourselves on being a global leader in strategic corporate communications. We have always led the way in purpose-driven communications and in developing innovative strategies around our company's *Purpose*. In 2023, we released our E-Purpose Strategy Report, which brings together the insights of senior strategy consultants from around the world.

These insights come from consulting on sustainability and social impact communications for a diverse range of clients across a wide range of industries. The report distills cutting-edge insights and best practices to provide inspiration and valuable guidance for organizations embarking on the journey of sustainability communications.

When it comes to purpose-driven corporate sustainable development, there are three essential elements that should be integrated into the communication strategy, whether on a global scale or focusing specifically on China. First and foremost, it's crucial to demonstrate the company's commitment and investment in sustainable development, especially concerning environmental concerns, climate change, and inclusivity issues. This commitment not only reflects the company's mission and core values but also shapes its brand image as one that cares about the planet and its inhabitants. For instance, many energy companies have made carbon neutrality a strategic goal for external communication, an integral part of shaping their brand identity as stewards of the Earth.

Second, it's essential to strengthen the company's ability to integrate and implement sustainable development goals. Companies should actively communicate their expertise, innovation, and capacity for change in the realm of sustainable development. This includes incorporating these principles into their business operations and offering solutions to pertinent challenges. Initiatives like conducting industry-specific whitepapers and gaining insights into future industry trends not only serve as industry benchmarks but also showcase a company's commitment to innovation and its positive contributions to the industry.

Third, harness the creative and storytelling power inherent in public relations to infuse innovative execution into the company's sustainable development projects. This involves cleverly leveraging external resources, collaborating with partners, and narrating the entire journey in a compelling story format—from the initial intent to the actual measures taken and the achieved outcomes. This forms a complete chain for conveying the company's sustainable brand message.

**Guided by the Purpose Practice of FINN Partners' global headquarters, the FINN Partners China team proactively responds to the unique needs of the Chinese market and business environment.**

Leveraging our deep understanding and core competencies in public relations, we have pioneered a professional services department called Sustainability & Social Impact, or "Double S" for short. The division is dedicated to fully engaging in all aspects of corporate sustainability programs, including research, positioning, implementation, disclosure, and analysis.

By leveraging our strengths in market research, policy analysis, partner networks, in-depth media relations and the art of storytelling, we actively participate in and support the entire program lifecycle. This elevated approach transforms public relations from merely contributing to the issuance of sustainability and ESG reports to a strategic force that effectively coordinates resources.

Since the inception of this specialized division, the FINN China team has worked with a wide range of companies on sustainability communications projects, some of which have won prestigious industry awards. For example, we creatively designed the "BioCity" concept for the "Carbon Neutrality White Paper" project

of NovoZymes, a leading global biotech company, showcasing the world vision of biotechnology's contribution to human well-being. We effectively communicated how NovoZymes' enzyme solutions can improve efficiency and reduce carbon emissions in a variety of sectors, including energy, agriculture, transportation, and manufacturing. Utilizing storytelling techniques and multimedia platforms, our team seamlessly blended scientific insights with biotech highlights, bridging the gap between the twin goals of carbon—a hot topic in society and the economy—and the core purpose of the company.

In addition, the FINN China team has been recognized for its creativity and execution of sustainability communication projects, such as our partnership with the Australian Wool Board. In 2022, we launched the Bird's Nest Aid Program in Laojun Mountain, Yunnan, which visually demonstrated the natural qualities of wool by building bird's nests in the wilderness. In 2023, we partnered with avant-garde dance troupe *Sleepless Nights* in the Chongqing mountains with a sustainability project called *Return*, that used contemporary dance to guide audiences through the juxtaposition of environmental destruction and the resilience of nature's life force. The project told the story of the complete degradation of wool products in their natural environment.

These examples emphasize how the power of public relations and communications can truly contribute value to a company's sustainability efforts.





# How to ‘Speak’ Purpose without Rocking the Boat: Six Smart Tips

By: Amy Terpeluk

## Yesterday was Yesterday — Purpose and Social Impact Has a New Role to Play in Business Strategy

Companies face a unique challenge in a culturally and politically charged environment: aligning business objectives and strategy with purpose-centered efforts. What can “feel” like the right thing to do may unintentionally quickly threaten to fracture customer relationships. Purpose and Social Impact is far more than “it feels right to do,” or “this will be good for our visibility.” When it comes to corporate reputation, these decisions are central to business objectives, strategy, and customer expectations.

The social climate has changed and the tools that engage people to share their opinions have been democratized. Now, one powerful voice in objection can rally the multitude to join in the conversation and share polarizing opinions. Companies that “either hold their ground” or “retreat” suffer the pain — lost confidence in management, stock value decline, product boycotts, and even pop-up protests.

Like any other difficult decision in business, purpose-based decisions that elevate business

value to current and potential customers, investors, and even regional and national policymakers require the same commitment to market research, understanding audience expectations, and evaluation of whether to be part of a powerful coalition or go it alone. The chief communication officer and communication team are charged with making savvy decisions on the foundation sustaining and strengthening corporate reputation.

Plenty of surveys make the case that businesses should take the lead in tackling social and environmental disparities. For instance, a recent “Hunger Matters” survey from HelloFresh showed that more than two-thirds of Americans believe more should be done by brands and organizations to combat hunger and food insecurity. These types of data entice companies to embrace tasks that address a wide range of pressing issues. But companies can’t sidestep the basics — those issues aligned to a company’s business “purpose” to exist and market expectations. Companies absolutely do have the ability to make a difference. That “difference” must remain rooted in business objectives.





Here are general tips for corporate social responsibility, communication, foundation, and C-Suite leaders to consider before taking the plunge into purpose and social impact.

### **1. Align to Core Objectives and Market Value**

To integrate purpose and social impact into a company's communication efforts, leaders must start by considering objectives, strategy and customer value. This involves aligning social initiatives with the company's core values and mission. Study the market, customer, and investor landscape; examine what worked and didn't for other companies that acted as if doing good things correlated with sales outcomes without greater consideration. Developing a purpose-centered idea or campaign requires doing the homework with employees, customers and other market influencers. It's possible to get started by testing the waters without reputational risk.

### **2. Listen To and Engage with Stakeholders**

Open a line of communication with stakeholders — including employees, customers, and the communities the business serves and operates in — to understand how initiatives will be received and make necessary adjustments.

Regular feedback mechanisms, such as surveys and focus groups, provide key insights into how these efforts are perceived and where adjustments should be made. That engagement secures confidence that the effort is not happenstance or craven.

### **3. Consistently Measure Impact**

Before engaging in any external effort, ensure you can monitor short-term and long-term goals and review progress as a standard business practice. The concept of "ESG Reports" is going through its own swirl. Still, tracking a company's pathway on sustainability, community impact and responsible management is a long-required process. In a world that increasingly demands corporate transparency, operational accountability suggests commitment to social impact. Regularly reviewing these practices — shared according to business needs with stakeholders — will build collaborative bonds for ongoing efforts.

### **4. Build Internal and External Coalitions to Support Efforts**

Employees can be powerful advocates for a company's purpose-driven initiatives. Grassroots advocacy from employees can be more impactful than top-down communication. When employees genuinely believe in and talk about their company's values, it resonates more deeply with the public and appears less like corporate propaganda. Companies should also look at coalition building from within to the outside world. Outside the organization, forging alliances with nonprofits and community organizations — the willingness to unite to advance a social impact effort — reinforces that a company working with others is prepared to share the credit to amplify change.

### **5. Amplify Stories at the Right Moments with the Right Voices**

The C-Suite leaders are the company's "storytellers" and must be willing to champion internally and externally any purpose effort and amplify the company's purpose-driven mission internally and externally. Leadership can employ storytelling techniques when speaking with employees, key customers, the market or investors. Sharing personal and (with permission) employee stories in company blogs, internal newsletters, and social media

channels focuses on the journey and the people behind the initiatives rather than the outcomes. And most importantly, lead with partner voices on the frontlines of change who have powerful impact stories to tell. This approach emphasizes authenticity and personal connection.

### **6. Adapt Communication Strategies**

In a politically charged environment, companies must be prepared to adapt their communication strategies to changing circumstances. This includes being ready to respond to crises or criticisms thoughtfully and measuredly.

Having a crisis management plan for every proactive communications strategy that includes clear guidelines for addressing social impact-related issues can help navigate potential backlash. This proactive approach ensures that the company's values are upheld even under scrutiny.

### **Social Impact, Reputation, and Business Success**

Building a purpose-driven reputation in a politically charged environment requires a strategic and nuanced approach. Global companies must focus on aligning their efforts with core values, leveraging subtle storytelling, empowering employees, forming strategic partnerships, and maintaining a long-term perspective. This approach mitigates the risk of backlash and fosters genuine and lasting change. In a world where actions speak louder than words, these principles guide companies in making a meaningful difference while navigating the complexities of today's socio-political landscape.



# The Shifting Landscape of Brand Purpose: Unveiling Consumer Priorities

By: Amy Terpeluk

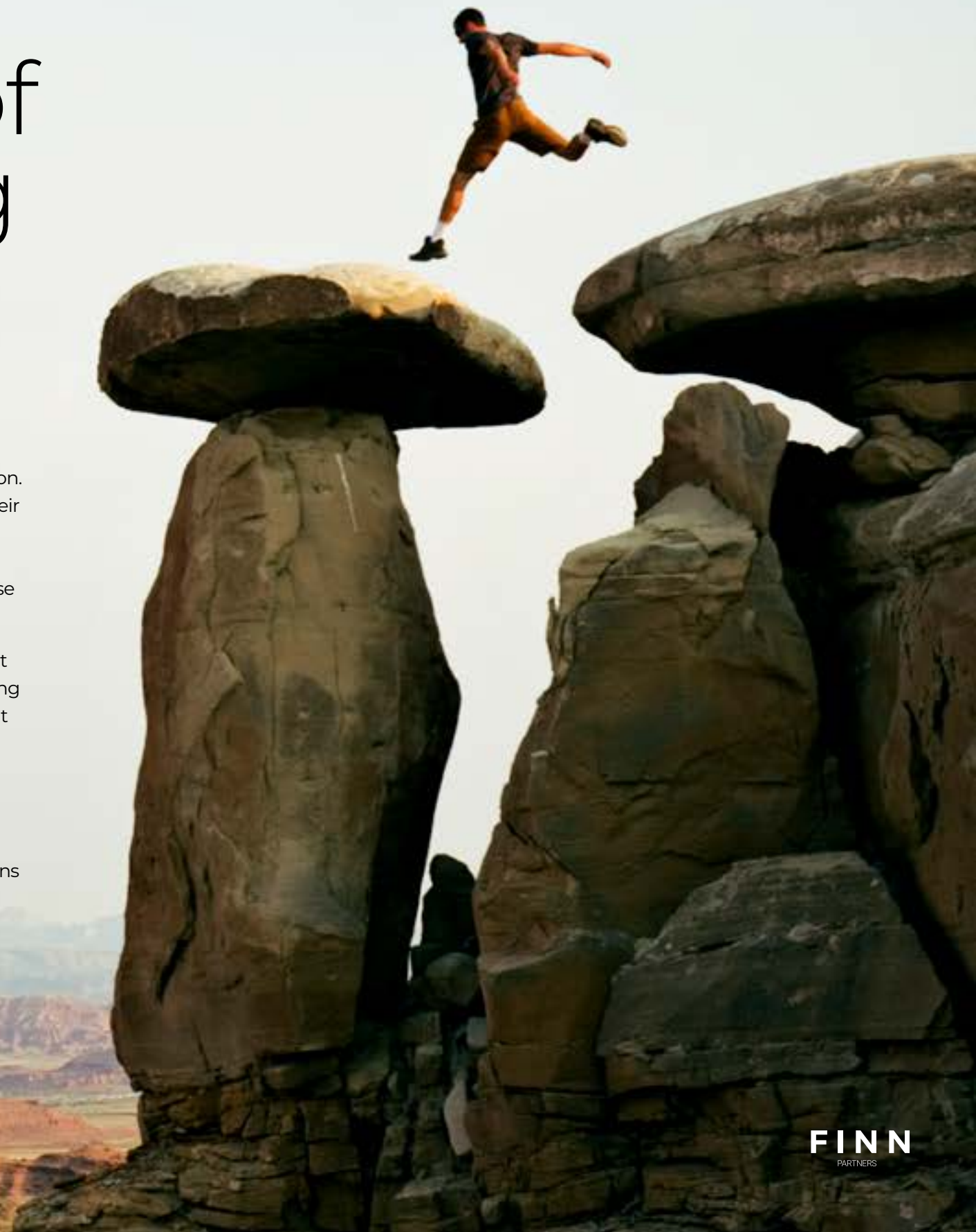
When companies stumble on product quality, commit messaging mishaps, or have ethical shortcomings laid bare, the news media is never far from the controversy. Many of these stories are about disparities and discrimination that cause community pain—pitting customers against companies. Often, the drumbeat of news reporting is so loud that it cannot be ignored—day after day leading the news cycle. It can feel endless and all-consuming.

The importance of these stories isn't lost on consumers, who increasingly see corporate social responsibility and brand purpose as front-of-mind purchase considerations. Consequently, it has become critical for companies to ascertain the consumer's pulse and understand the public expectations of how iconic brands take on the challenges of our time.

“Catchy” is a poor substitute for championing a cause. Not all pressing issues require a corporate voice! Brand stewards must consider what issues are essential for their companies to engage on. Before leaping to the clarion call, they must ask why and when their brands should engage, or if they need to engage on a particular issue at all. To answer these questions, brand managers must carefully consider if an issue aligns with their products and purpose and how closely the issues at hand impact their consumers.

Sometimes corporate response to emerging issues is reflexive. But creating social impact isn't about jumping into a headline-grabbing topic unadvisedly. Corporate action is a statement of commitment and is translated as an ongoing pledge to remain in the trenches long-term. Speaking out on trending issues that do not relate to the brand's identity can offend, causing consumers to view the company's executives as opportunists or disloyal to brand values.

We have seen how ill-informed public commentary and campaigns have dire consequences—a tipping point to customer, employee and stakeholder backlash. We have also seen the ire brands face







when they neglect to take a stance on issues they have long claimed to champion.

Creating enduring social impact that cements customer ties to a brand requires a deeper understanding of how issues intersect with the company's mission and values. The [FINN Purpose Alignment Study](#) underscores the importance of research in gauging the relationship between brand, customer and cause. This study offers a metric enabling brand stewards to navigate the evolving landscape of brand purpose and how organizations can align communications priorities to social impact.

### **The importance of pricing and performance**

There is no surprise that consumer purchasing decisions are driven by price and product performance. It stands to reason that in a highly competitive market—and at times of economic uncertainty—consumers prioritize product purchases around affordable quality.

It is in the company's best interest to establish pricing strategies that are market-competitive, transparent and consistent. Consumers appreciate brands prioritizing fair pricing practices, fostering trust and long-term loyalty. But there is more to brand sustainability.

What happens when price and performance are comparable between two brands? How then, does a consumer choose between what are seemingly equals? This is when companies cannot overlook purpose-related factors.

### **The rise of social impact factors**

Beyond immediate benefits, price, performance and product attributes, consumers now value the societal impact of their purchase. This is an expansive shift in consumer consciousness toward more holistic considerations when establishing a purpose.

The FINN Purpose Alignment Study highlighted six social impact factors that ranked among the top 20 brand purpose sub-factors most important to consumers. These factors indicate a growing consumer demand for brands to actively contribute to society and the environment. By aligning themselves with social and environmental causes, brands secure an opportunity to connect with consumers who

prioritize sustainability and corporate social responsibility in their buying decision.

The study identified that in an era of heightened scrutiny on ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) reporting practices and the return on business bottom line, social impact aspects are crucial consumer inflection points. Companies that integrate sustainable practices, authentically support aligned social causes and exhibit ethical business conduct have a competitive advantage in capturing the attention and loyalty of socially conscious consumers. Among the social impact ranking factors, keeping customer data private and secure, and operating in a trustworthy way rank higher than new features and product innovation.

Consumers want to associate themselves with brands that have a positive public image and are seen as trustworthy and reliable. They see where they spend their money as a reflection of their personal values.

### **New paradigm in marketing strategy**

The study's findings may have significant implications for companies' marketing strategies. Brands must carefully craft messaging and campaigns to reflect the evolving consumer priorities in brand purpose. It is essential to highlight the economic benefits and value offered by products while simultaneously showcasing brand commitment to social impact and sustainability in equal measure.

The goal for brand stewards must be to connect with consumers on a deeper, emotional level. Sharing stories and initiatives related to environmental conservation, community engagement and ethical sourcing can enhance consumers' perception of a brand and foster a sense of purpose among consumers. When consumers and brands are aligned in purpose, they share the understanding that by working together to address pressing societal concerns, they are in harmony.

Embracing brand purpose and telling that story can be a competitive advantage in fostering consumer loyalty, enhancing reputation, and contributing to a more sustainable and socially responsible future.

It's beyond debate; purpose is good business.





# Philanthropic Ventures Take Center Stage

By: Amy Terpeluk

**P**hilanthropic ventures have always been essential in addressing pressing issues. From climate change to social justice to expanding opportunity for historically underserved populations, when governments and businesses have been slow to act, there has always been a place for philanthropists and their organizations.

Today, corporate leaders have become increasingly reticent to speak out about social issues in the face of modern political divisiveness. As a result, nonprofits and philanthropists have a unique opportunity—and indeed, a responsibility—to take ownership of critical societal conversations.

## **Threading the corporate responsibility needle**

Understanding why corporate leaders have become wary when tackling pressing social issues is important. The political landscape is increasingly polarized, with responses to issues such as climate change, inequality, and immigration becoming highly tribal. Corporate leaders may fear that taking a stand on these issues might alienate a significant





portion of their customer base, and they wish to avoid the backlash that might result. Additionally, corporate leaders are under pressure to maximize shareholder value and need a defensible position on ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) commitments and outcomes.

However, these concerns should be balanced against businesses' broader responsibilities to society. Consider that companies significantly impact the communities in which they operate, and they have the power and resources to effect positive change that other pillars of society might lack. One company alone cannot solve for these complicated environmental and social issues, and corporate action can catalyze social investments from other businesses. But the fact is, communications on socially responsible investments are a crucial piece of the puzzle, so even if corporations are taking action, if they're not speaking about it out of fear or complacency, they won't reap the benefits.

Purpose can't become only an internal narrative.

### The role of philanthropic ventures

This is where philanthropic ventures come in. Unlike companies, philanthropic ventures do not have to worry about alienating customers or maximizing shareholder value. Yes, they're beholden to boards, but their reason for existence is to create a positive social impact. Philanthropic ventures can work collaboratively with companies, governments, and civil organizations to activate innovative solutions to social challenges across the entire spectrum of society.

Moreover, philanthropic ventures are often more flexible and agile than companies, able to pivot quickly to address emerging dilemmas

and respond to changing circumstances. This makes them well-suited to tackling pressing problems facing our society. Philanthropic ventures associated with major companies might be able to tread ground that might not fit with the sister corporation's ethos. Consider the Gates Foundation, which focuses on improving global health and reducing poverty. It's naturally associated with Microsoft but, through partnerships with governments, NGOs and other stakeholders, the foundation has made significant progress in eradicating polio, reducing maternal and child mortality, and improving access to education, entirely independent of Microsoft.

However, philanthropic ventures—particularly truly independent ones—face their challenges. For one thing, they are often under-resourced and lack the institutional support that company-backed ventures enjoy. They also must navigate a complex landscape of regulatory and legal requirements, making it difficult to gain traction in a crowded activist ecosystem.

Nevertheless, philanthropic ventures have a unique opportunity to take ownership of solving social issues and to fill the conversation void left by reticent corporate leaders. There are a few strategies to consider:

**Collaboration and partnership.** One of the most effective ways philanthropic ventures can address pressing social issues is by highlighting collaboration with other organizations, including companies. By working together, they can pool their resources and expertise, achieving a more significant impact than they could on their own. Suppose companies are hesitant to take credit for the effort. In that case, nonprofits can step up and drive the impact narrative,

building awareness to spur funding and building credibility for the corporate partner investing in the programs.

**Advocacy and policy change.** Another way philanthropic ventures can take ownership of solving social issues is by engaging in advocacy work and promoting policy change. While companies may be reticent about taking a stance on controversial issues, philanthropic ventures can speak out and unapologetically advocate for the change they're on the frontlines of creating.

**Direct action.** Finally, philanthropic ventures can directly address pressing social issues in innovative ways and communicate about both successes and programmatic challenges. Nonprofits, as social incubators, can lead the debate over what's working and what's not, and why.

For example, a philanthropic venture focused on addressing homelessness could provide shelter and support services to those in need while liaising with local and state governments to help alleviate the homelessness crisis through new legislation or regulations.

Ultimately, the world needs difference-makers, no matter where they come from. The realm of philanthropy is a familiar frontier in the fight for a more just, equitable, and sustainable world. Still, with increased political polarization and other factors, philanthropic ventures are in a position now to take center stage. They can be bold and creative and can take risks in a way that corporations either can't or won't, and with the size and scope of the problems we face, that's precisely what's needed.





# Chapter Three

## **Social Impact**

*“In today’s interconnected world, the challenges we face as a global community highlight the critical importance of integrating social impact into the business landscape. Driving positive change for people is a noble pursuit for any enterprise, but it necessitates rigorous market research and a deep understanding of the needs and expectations of both audiences and stakeholders. When aligned with authenticity and strategic insight, brands have the power to be transformative forces in social impact.”*

Aman Gupta  
Managing Partner, Health Practice Asia Lead



# Is “Whataboutism” Killing Empathy?

In the Information Age, Criticism of Expressions of Empathy Drives Silos or Silence in Response



By: Gil Bashe

**In** a world where information bombards us every waking moment and we feel an urgency to react to every beep and vibration from our smartphone, a concerning trend has emerged where tribal opinion and empathy clash. Enter “*Whataboutism.*”





One of the most troubling consequences of *whataboutism* is the erosion of empathy. In our rush to defend positions or deflect criticism, we overlook the human component of issues. Instances of social injustice, environmental degradation, and economic inequality represent real struggles real people face. Yet, in the age of *whataboutism*, empathy has become a casualty of our ideological battles.

What lies beneath this behavioral phenomenon, and what does it say about our capacity to understand or respect one another? Expressing concern for any specific community can now offend supporters of another community and become a trap that suppresses authentic empathy. *Whataboutism* steers us toward making sure not to offend anyone; it forces us to try and avoid barbs rather than productively discuss a specific, time-pressing, painful issue. The result is that we stay silent rather than speak to one particular person's needs or community's plight.

Urgent communication increasingly informs the tone and tempo of our discourse, where knee-jerk responses encouraged by social media cascade in response to the expression of concern for one community's difficulties. Someone is bound to be outraged and outspoken about it if we fail to acknowledge in tandem the predicament of others. This kind of blowback is all but guaranteed when a business, community or spiritual leader voices that concern. In that case, the wrath of the "X bots" is unleashed. The fear of *whataboutism* eventually gives birth to siloed tribalism and the fear of saying anything.

#### **Conversation Without Substance**

*Whataboutism* operates on the premise that rather than address a specific issue, our focus should be more expansive, more inclusive.

The problem is that our concern and empathy become diluted and ineffectual. Politicians, in particular, often structure their comments during debates, speeches, and community visits as all-encompassing. Instead of engaging with the substance and acknowledging the validity of a specific concern, *whataboutism* is deployed as a diversionary tactic to steer the conversation away from the main point.

Suppose you support Black Lives Matter because deadly violence, economic disparities, and well-documented health inequities disproportionately threaten Black Americans. In the wake of the George Floyd murder and protests, responses driven by *whataboutism* (e.g., "all lives matter,") expressed points of view that would be valid at any other time but, in that specific moment, seemed designed to undermine empathy.

This is equally true of concerns for people suffering outside our communities; however, in the face of an unfolding crisis, expressing concern for *all people* does away with our ability to express empathy or solidarity for any *one* people. This "all or nothing" mentality also diminishes our ability to feel empathy or solidarity for more than one group.

#### **Can Two "Rights" Occupy the Same Brain Space?**

The human mind's multitasking capacity has limits. When multimedia — particularly social media — accelerates the flood of information, it diminishes our mind's analytic ability to move from thought to thought and task to task. This cognitive muscle, termed "parallel processing," enables individuals to connect varied mental tasks and concepts concurrently. However, how we effectively juggle multiple thoughts simultaneously and consecutively is complex — it's a gift for some and an impossible struggle for others.



The brain's architecture paves the way for parallel processing. Different regions of the brain specialize in distinct cognitive functions. Neurologically, the prefrontal cortex handles executive functions like decision-making, while the hippocampus is dedicated to memory.

When two topics don't heavily overlap in brain regions, it's easier to think about them in tandem — brain function that employs diverse and expansive thinking is where the prefrontal cortex and hippocampus co-exist harmoniously.

At its core, *whataboutism* plays psychological games and forces communicators to avoid topical minefields and speak to all points of view at all times or be called out, requiring them to either dig in their heels or acquiesce and admit error.

*"Can I express my concern for you alone at this moment? Or, must I write about your suffering or tragedy incompletely so that others feel their struggle is not ignored?"*

That has become a unique challenge in a fast-moving information world where partisan politics and tribalism exert outsized influence.

### **Tribalism Over Empathy**

*Whataboutism* reveals our deep biases and tribal/nationalistic instincts. We tend to passionately defend our beliefs and affiliations, too often at the expense of understanding the pain and suffering of others. An *us versus them* tribal mentality, in which empathy is reserved only for those within our religion, region or race, calls on us to view outsiders with suspicion or disdain.

The rise of *whataboutism* coincides with the information overload of the digital age. With a constant stream of news, social media updates, and opinions competing for our attention, it is easy to



become overwhelmed. Issues are often reduced to soundbites or headlines, devoid of the depth and nuance they demand. As a result, our ability to understand situations becomes diluted by the sheer volume of competing narratives vying for our attention.

### **Expressing a Dual Narrative**

*Whataboutism* perpetuates a false equivalency between issues, suggesting that addressing one issue somehow negates the importance of another. This binary thinking fails to recognize the interconnectedness of social problems and the need for multifaceted solutions. Reducing complex issues to simplistic comparisons, *whataboutism* undermines

meaningful dialogue and halts progress.

How do we counteract the effects of *whataboutism* and reclaim our humanity for continuous dialogue and empathy?

We must cultivate a culture of diversity and inclusion. That will help to lessen the knee-jerk tendency of rejecting the concerns of others. We must foster open-mindedness and acknowledge our biases, blind spots, and areas for psychological growth. This requires a willingness to engage in an uncomfortable conversation, which is essential to feeling genuine empathy and reaching an understanding.

We must resist the temptation to engage in *whataboutism* ourselves. We should address issues

humbly and honestly instead of deflecting criticism or derailing conversations. This means listening actively to others' perspectives, acknowledging their concerns, and seeking common ground wherever possible. Stephen R. Covey wrote that it calls for patience: "Seek first to understand, then to be understood."

Feeling empathy cannot become a lost skill. It is one of the things that makes us human. It means putting ourselves in others' shoes, even if only for a moment, recognizing their humanity and the validity of their experience. Empathy requires us to move beyond a singular perspective and recognize every individual's inherent worth and dignity, regardless of their background or beliefs. It does not require us to embrace their ideas or ideals.

To do this, we must recover the discipline to sit quietly, listen, and learn. That's the basis of becoming critical thinkers and skilled communicators who can separate fact from fiction and recognize the manipulative tactics of *whataboutism* when we encounter them in a world awash with rapid information. By staying informed, questioning assumptions, and actively seeking diverse perspectives, we can immunize our discourse against the polarizing effects of *whataboutism* and work toward a more compassionate and inclusive society.

The magnitude of misinformation, disinformation, and *whataboutism* is troubling in our democratic societies, which encourage open discourse. In recognizing the psychological roots of *whataboutism* and working to neutralize its effects, we may be able to preserve our human capacity for empathy and engage in more meaningful dialogue on the issues that matter at specific moments. We can create space to listen and grow emotionally and organizationally.

It's time to move beyond the distractions of *whataboutism* toward a more engaged and empathetic world.





# Danger in Abstraction

## Politics vs. People in an Election Year

By: Cullen Burnell

**In** the political arena, the squeaky wheel gets the grease. Put another way, those who shout the loudest and stir the most controversy dominate the policy discussion and news cycle.

The cacophony of overamplified bad faith virtue signaling and opportunism we've been subjected to over the past few months is overwhelming as the nation braces for an immensely consequential presidential election in the fall.

Those of us who even semi-regularly peruse X, formerly known as Twitter, or tune in to a national broadcast on our 24-hour news network of choice, can easily fall into the cognitive trap of thinking that the general population absorbs information in the same way. It's easy to forget that the latest controversy consuming social media or splashing across the front page of the New York Times often doesn't penetrate the awareness of the overwhelming majority of Americans. Issues that we may find self-evidently seismic may go entirely unnoticed, coming and going for most as little more than a water cooler conversation at work or overheard amongst the din at a social event on the weekend.





It's perhaps unsurprising that the voting public generally sees the issues that affect us all in abstract terms. That is to say, they're concerned primarily with what they can see and interact with — namely, their bubble: family, immediate community, and personal finances.

While entirely understandable, in our increasingly divided political climate, it presents a significant risk, namely that those who don't follow the goings-on closely, are hyper-fixated on niche issues, or who have fallen prey to [disinformation campaigns](#) see fellow citizens outside their sphere of influence as *others*. We are entering an enormously important election season, and millions of Americans are only thinking of their fellow citizens in abstract terms — 'trans people,' 'immigrants,' 'minorities.'

Consequently, there's a problematic distance between the general public and those who stand to lose the most. There's grave danger when people, often unknowingly, slip into depersonalizing others and subsequently fall victim to bad faith demonization of some of society's most vulnerable people.

**Relatability — or, at an absolute minimum, the recognition of someone else's humanity — is often a necessary precursor to empathy and progress. When that's lacking, we are indeed through the looking glass.**

What, then, can be done to resolve the disconnect that, at its core, threatens to deteriorate our democracy and public discourse so thoroughly as to render it unrecognizable? How can we start to repair or rebuild the connections we used to share?

It can be all too easy for even those with the best intentions to enter a sort of dissociative fugue state in the face of looming global climate catastrophe, the degradation of human rights, the fraying of democracy, and ever-expanding wealth inequality. Sometimes, it's too much to take, particularly for those with a sensitive streak, so good people do nothing. They retreat instead to the relative safety of their immediate surroundings. When the world's problems feel too big, the only thing that feels secure is what's within the confines of your own home.

While that may feel right in the short term, it's ultimately shortsighted.

Suppose we're to overcome the disconnectedness that characterizes our current social discourse. In that case, engagement is the only answer if we're to break down the walls that encourage some to think of their neighbors and fellow citizens as abstractions. By remaining silent and keeping the stories of true social impact to ourselves, we cede the lectern to bad-faith actors who want to build those walls ever higher.

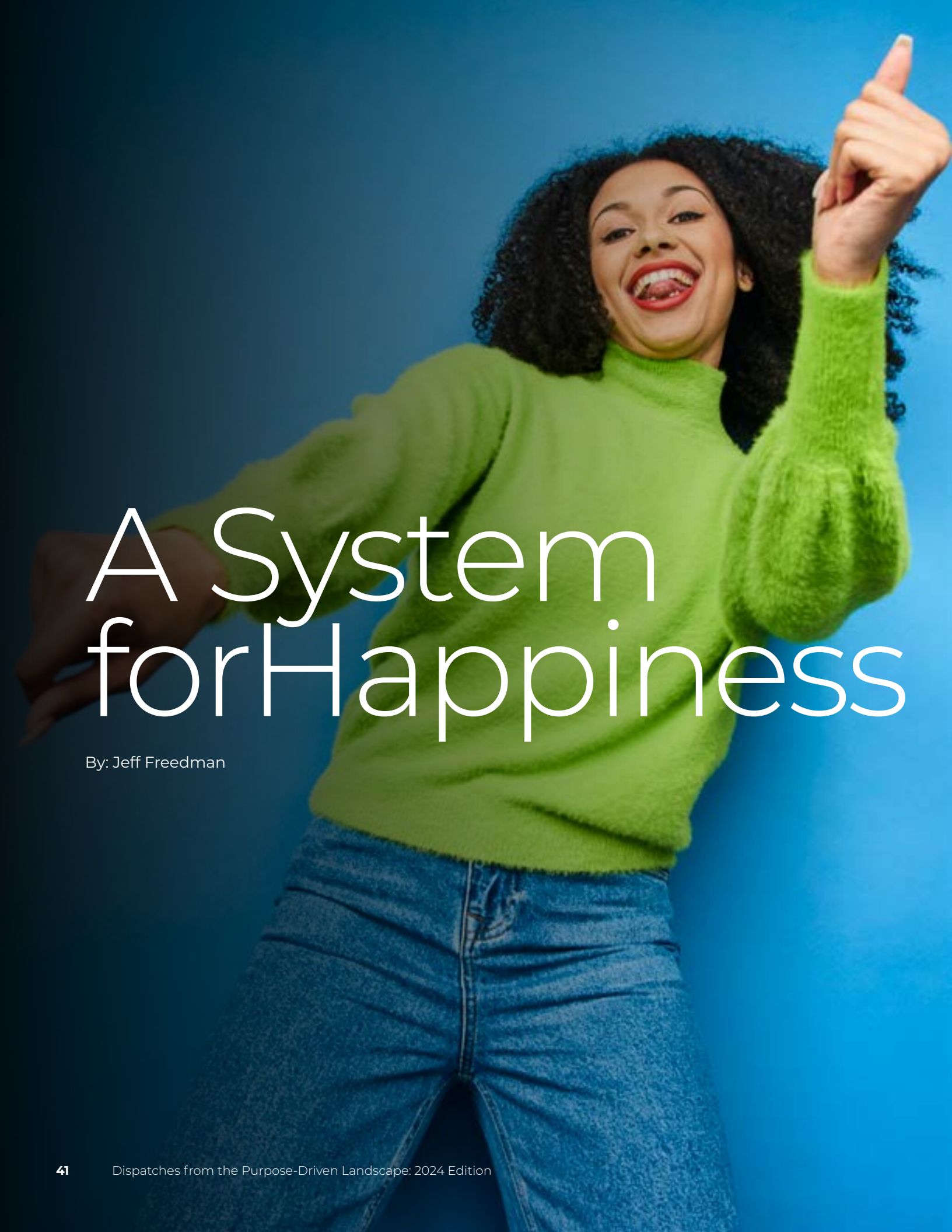
Communicators are essential in this fight. Those who, through their words, can bring people along for a day in someone else's shoes are at the frontlines of the conflict against abstraction. The most effective communicators don't talk about abortion rights in statehouses; they tell the story of the teenage rape victim who has to travel out of state to find the care she needs. They don't talk about how absurd it is to paint trans people as deviants and predators; they amplify the voices of devastated parents whose trans daughter ended her life because she didn't see a path to live authentically in her ultra-conservative state. They don't pontificate on melting ice caps amid rising global temperatures; they focus on the human impact of climate change — the famine gripping a developing nation, unprecedented tsunamis in the South Pacific, and wildfires destroying homes across Canada.

These are the stories of human impact that move the needle.

This is what's needed to overcome abstraction and achieve relatability. It's what so much of our news media currently fails to do. The cliché about coverage of politics as a sport becomes more accurate with each passing controversy and injustice. Without a distinct effort from conscientious journalists and committed communicators, fatalism will continue to drown out what might be productive.

Speaking in general terms has done us no good. It's time for a change of approach. Real human lives are at stake, and the future we face — should we fail — grows increasingly dark and disturbing.





# A System for Happiness

By: Jeff Freedman

**O**ver Memorial Day weekend, I attended the Brown University graduation ceremony to witness my niece, Arielle, receive her diploma. While I was expecting to hear a speech from a famous person, I instead had the pleasure of listening to two graduating students take the honors. (I later learned that this is a unique Brown tradition).

Both graduates were incredibly well-spoken and shared insights that resonated with me. The first speaker, Margherita Micaletti-Hinojal shared seven life lessons to achieve happiness that she learned while at Brown. The second speaker, Kailiang Fu, spoke to the merits of Brown's unique learning approach, referring to it as a highly fault-tolerant system, the same attribute we depend upon with our technology systems, where they continue to function even when parts of the system are failing.

For those less familiar with Brown, they have an open curriculum where students create their own course of study, do not calculate GPAs and any class can be taken as "satisfactory/no credit." Honestly, I always thought this approach seemed a bit too laid back, especially for an Ivy League school. But after listening to both speeches, I've come to reconsider my thinking and identified five critical traits that I believe a system like Brown's promotes.

**Courage.** College is a time to explore your horizons, discover new passions and prepare for the future. When you reduce the fear of failure (or potentially even encourage it) we increase our courage to take risks and try new things. You can't succeed unless you try.

**Community.** When you lessen (or even remove) internal competition (i.e., no grading system), everyone is more driven to help one another and discover new things together. This is what true community is all about.

**Credence.** The success of almost every system is dependent upon those who use it. When you select and give credence to people that you believe will use it properly (you trust them), the system is more likely to work.

**Confidence.** When you are comfortable trying new things, not too scared of failure, and know that there is a community of support behind you, confidence levels can dramatically increase. And, in life, confidence matters.

**Cheerfulness.** In her speech, Margherita noted that Brown often appears at the top of the "Happiest Students" lists and referred to many of the concepts above in her lessons. For purposes of a fifth C, I've changed this trait to cheerfulness. While there are many things that can lead to cheerfulness/happiness, I'd argue that the four C's above are certainly among the most influential: Courage. Community. Credence. Confidence.

Congrats to all the recent graduates! Whether you attended Brown or any other school, I hope that you take these traits to heart and find a way to develop them. And for those running businesses, leading teams and/or raising families, I hope you can find a way to promote these traits among yourself and others.





# Global Public Health: A Pathway to Equality and Prosperity

**By: Christopher Nial**

Global public health often sounds like an abstract, lofty ideal — a trite phrase encapsulating a world of complexities and challenges. Yet, at its core, the impact of global public health is a potential great equalizer, a bridge across the chasms created by wealth, education, language, and culture disparities. It's a concept that transcends boundaries, offering a universal promise of better health and, consequently, a better life. But to fully grasp its transformative power, we must delve into the intricate web of issues that need to be addressed to genuinely improve access to healthcare and unleash the myriad benefits it holds.

Take the story of Leela, a four-year-old girl living in Kisii County of Kenya, the lake epidemic zone. Leela's life, like that of many children in similar settings, is overshadowed by the grim spectre of malaria. This disease, caused by a parasite transmitted through the bite of infected mosquitoes, remains one of the leading causes of mortality and morbidity in many parts of the world, particularly among children like her. The statistics are stark, and the chance of reaching her fifth birthday is dauntingly slim for Leela.





However, this is where the potential impact of global public health shines. Consider the life-changing impact of seemingly simple interventions: bed nets to prevent mosquito bites, artemisinin-based medicines to treat malaria, and, more recently, the introduction of malaria vaccines. These innovations are not just tools in the fight against disease; they represent hope, opportunity, and a doorway to a future that once seemed unattainable.

Envision a future where Leela, shielded from the threat of malaria, grows up to attend school. Education opens up a realm of possibilities that were previously out of reach. She could become a teacher, imparting knowledge and inspiration to the next generation. She might choose to study law, advocating for the rights and wellbeing of her community. Or perhaps she'll be drawn to medicine, becoming a doctor who stands on the frontlines, helping other children to thrive and survive, just as she did.

This is the impact of global public health. It's not just about preventing and treating illnesses; it's about creating a world where every child, regardless of where they are born, has the opportunity to lead a healthy, fulfilling life. It's about breaking the vicious cycle of poverty and disease and fostering a cycle of health and prosperity.

Of course, achieving this vision is no small feat. It requires a concerted effort from governments, healthcare providers, non-profits, and communities. It demands investment, not just in medical interventions, but in the infrastructure and education that support them. Language barriers must be overcome, cultural sensitivities respected, and local practices integrated into health strategies.

Moreover, the role of global entities and corporations, such as MSD, Sanofi, GSK, Roche, Novartis, AbbVie, Novo Nordisk, and philanthropic organisations like the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Johns Hopkins University School of Public Health, Gavi, and PATH, is crucial. Their expertise, resources, and commitment to public health can drive innovation, support local initiatives, and foster collaborations that bring about tangible change.

In conclusion, global public health is more than a concept; it's a mission. It's about giving every Leela in the world a chance to survive and thrive. While the challenges are many and the journey long, the rewards — a healthier, more equitable world — are worth every effort. This is why the [Global Health Impact](#) group was created within FINN Partners.

As we continue to navigate this path, let us remember that in improving health, we are not just saving lives; we are transforming futures.



The Fight  
to Obscure  
Reality and  
What We Can  
Do About It



# Plagued By Debate — When Self-Interest and Facts Collide

By: Cullen Burnell

## **Conspiracy theories are fun.**

It's comforting having a community of like-minded people. It's gratifying believing that you're uniquely informed, in-the-know while others languish in ignorance. It's empowering to feel like you have agency, more than a cog in an economic, societal, or governmental wheel.

The social isolation exacerbated by the pandemic has pushed people even more online than they might have otherwise been, where they're bombarded with solid information grounded in facts and outlandish absurdities in equal measure. Public figures with agendas divorced from the best interests of the general population spew self-interested diatribes, and those who admire them follow along, often oblivious to the fact that they're pawns being moved about the chessboard, readily sacrificed at a moment's notice to advance the endgame.

An insidious natural byproduct of this activity is the inextricably linked *debate me* and *just asking questions* mindsets. We are in an increasingly dangerous public information environment, where every settled fact is open to challenge and good-

faith questions are fewer and further between with every passing year. It seems we are inundated with a cascade of falsehoods, and those who spew them have gleefully discovered that if they sound and appear authoritative enough, they will be taken seriously, on equal footing even with noted experts in whatever field they happen to be sowing for the eventual reaping.

The natural progression from this discovery is that the bad actors are empowered to challenge scientists, academics, and scholars, egged on by a media machine that has fully succumbed to so-called *whataboutism* and a fixation on elevating both sides of every issue — regardless of the virtue (or lack thereof) of every argument.

## **Bogging down progress**

The situation we now find ourselves in is one in which we are slow to advance critical conversations and slow to act because we get bogged down; experts, leaders, and luminaries in their fields are forced to argue minutia and defend settled science instead of actioning solutions empowered by public consensus and support.

Make no mistake: healthy debate, coming from a shared, good-faith understanding of the facts,



is critical to a functioning society. We should not unthinkingly accept the words of experts absent peer review and proper scrutiny. To wit: we can debate whether solar, nuclear, or wind power offers the most immediately impactful route towards a future centered on clean energy. We cannot have that debate if there's a denial that clean energy is necessary for the sustainability of our planet in the first place.

### **That's not what we have**

We have a public discourse in which there is obstinate and often willfully ignorant resistance to accepting even the most basic realities of a given

consensus is wrong. Physicians are hiding something from all of us. And those of us who believe settled science are lemmings, following mindlessly over a cliff.

### **If everyone is an expert, no one is**

In the age of social media, everyone has a megaphone and all of us are one tweet, one post, and one video away from going viral and becoming internet-famous. That's a tempting prospect for many; some have searched for the circles in which they can gain the most notoriety. That can lead them down troubling rabbit holes, building communities of skeptics utterly confident in their worldview and

modern society is built upon. It's bred an army of self-proclaimed experts, gurus, and talking heads, many of whom are simply opportunists who have realized that there's money to be made in making — and keeping — people angry and afraid. Others are true believers, drawn into one conspiracy theory or another in search of meaning and control.

The volume online is always on the highest possible setting, and scientific facts can be found next to the most extreme and outlandish ramblings. Trust in government has diminished, and the influencer class has, in many ways, taken its place. They're our contemporary traveling preachers and snake oil salesmen, technological nomads moving from platform to platform until they find a congregation enthusiastic enough to double down on.

Our media landscape incentivizes and propagates bad actors. Anyone with a message that speaks to a particular grievance of a particular subset of society can gain notoriety and, in many cases, make a comfortable living for themselves, profiting off people's ignorance and fear.

### **Navigating a post-truth world**

When there is no shared basis of understanding rooted in facts and decency, when everything is an open question, when people's minds are made up before they're knowledgeable and won't defer to expertise, education, or evidence, we are in a precarious position.

When we can't advance scientific breakthroughs that improve people's lives, marginalized communities are attacked and demonized, and conspiracy theories make their way into the day-to-day public and media discourse, conscientious people can grow into apathy or despair.

So how do we move forward in a post-truth world? How do we solve the most pressing problems when even a life-saving vaccine deployed amidst a global pandemic that [killed nearly seven million people](#) is subject to conspiracies and scorn? Can we preserve the human rights of the LGBTQ+ community and

defend them against baseless and dehumanizing accusations cast about casually across social and traditional media?

It's all too easy to throw up your hands and say that ignoring the conspiracy theorists, gaslighters, and their loyal following of online trolls is the only thing we can do, but that abandons people who might be brought back from that place and condemns them to fall even deeper down the disinformation hole. We need to extend a helping hand and pull them back from the brink.

It takes thoughtfulness, patience, and compassion — qualities that can be in short supply in the modern world. Those rooted in reality and guided by facts must continue building and amplifying the drumbeat of reason, common sense, and logic and overwhelm those who try to shout down the truth. If truth cedes the stage to falsehoods, people looking for guidance will have only one source available to them.

People are always going to make their own decisions. Infantilizing and proselytizing is a surefire way to push questioning people away. But if we are consistent, patient, and diligent in our adherence to reality and the truth, we may be able to turn the tide.

Getting into a debate with a bad-faith actor is fundamentally a waste of time. Rather, it's about getting the correct information in the ether and public discourse. It's about equaling the broadcasting capacity of the conspiracy theorists and debunking their absurdities. It's about being the calm, authoritative voice amongst a cacophony of discord and confusion.

It's a challenging role to play and broadly a thankless one. But public and planetary needs demand action, and if we can collectively turn the tide back toward reason and logic, we still have a chance to make the changes needed to build a more equitable, sustainable, and just world for all.

situation. We cannot debate the future of clean energy with those who are *just asking questions*. They either can't or won't accept that climate change is real. Then, even though there is no fact you could present, no evidence that you could provide that would shift their thinking, they demand an open debate as if their point of view is as valid and reasonable as the scientific consensus.

It is a virulent brand of narcissism, believing that everyone owes you an explanation and that if you don't have the expertise or perspective to understand, say, the intricacies of vaccine development and safety verification, the scientific

beyond convincing otherwise.

The cycle perpetuates, with certain corners of terminally online communities becoming more radicalized and more unwilling to accept any perspective that deviates from their filtered outlook. The mainstream scientific understanding becomes a lie, the government and corporations become shadowy cabals, and everyday people who don't live online are manipulated drones.

During the last several decades, there's been a trend that's demonized the educated, pandered to communities liable to take the bait, and generally turned away from the institutions and norms that







# Lessons from Anne Frank

By: Jeff Freedman

**L**ast week, while visiting Amsterdam, I had the opportunity to visit the Anne Frank house with my wife. Honestly, as I walked through the Annex and listened to the stories on the audio, it was hard to even imagine what happened there. After the tour, in an effort to better understand, I purchased the latest, uncensored version of Anne's diary.

Sure, this is a book about the Holocaust. But, it is also a book about humanity. About facing adversity. About growing up (perhaps too quickly). About relationships. About individuality. About innocence. And about love. While I recommend everyone take the time to read this book (it is required reading for all students in Amsterdam), I couldn't help but share some of the key lessons from this incredible young adult (she was 14-16 years old while writing it).

**Humanity is a wonderful thing.** The most revered people in Anne's diary are those who risked their lives to provide for her and those she was with in hiding. While Anne had a lot to say about those she was living with (not always so positive), she almost always acknowledged and was thankful for the heroism of those who helped them. As a Jew, this was a nice reminder that, even in the darkest of days, humanity lives on.

**Perspectives change.** In the time she wrote her diary, Anne matured from a child to a young adult (accelerated due to the circumstances). I was fascinated to see how her perspective on life, relationships, love and the world in general evolved over time. In particular, her reflection on prior diary entries demonstrated how views can change with life experiences and greater understanding. Let's all be open to new ideas, perspectives and ways of thinking.

**Actions speak louder than words.** Throughout the book, Anne's personal commentary and deep insights about the people around her demonstrated how others may view our actions. While it is impossible to understand the circumstances in which these people had to live, their actions sent messages that Anne clearly interpreted and made judgments about. Keep in mind that most everyone does the same. Act accordingly.

**Optimism makes things better.** Sadly, we all know the ending for Anne. But she didn't. And throughout her diary, it was clear that her optimism about life after the war got her and the others in hiding through the most difficult of times. It gave her the ability to laugh, the motivation to persevere, and the courage to overcome. Be an optimist.

**We don't truly know one another.** In the postscript of the book, Anne's father, Otto Frank, commented that he had no idea about the thoughts and feelings Anne shared in the book — his own child with whom he lived in such tight quarters for several years. While this saddened me, it also caused me to see that we are all unique individuals who cannot be fully understood. But, we must do our best to try. Ask. Listen. Empathize.

Throughout her diary, Anne shares her desire to become a writer and have a voice that makes a difference in the world. She was far ahead of her time regarding many social issues we still struggle with today. While obviously not the way in which she intended, her book is now one of the most read of all time, published in more than 70 languages. (Ironically, throughout the book, she comments about how no one will ever read her diary.)

We hear you, Anne, and thank you for all you have taught us.



Afterword

# An Unavoidable Complexity



By: Gil Bashe

**As** you explore the insights shared in this eBook, it's evident that the role of communication professionals has transcended traditional tasks and messaging. We now stand as custodians of purpose and social impact transmitted through an organization's objectives, strategies, and stakeholder community. Communication leaders are entrusted with conveying information, nurturing trust, and championing necessary transformation. This expanded responsibility necessitates a honed sensitivity to a fluid environment where stakeholders are increasingly discerning, expressive and values-driven.

The ideas presented in this edition reflect a need for authenticity in every communication endeavor. At a time when misinformation can proliferate—like a virus—at an alarming rate, understanding the benefits (and risks) of transparency is of utmost importance. Leaders must navigate these complexities by applying a strategic eye, ensuring ideas and actions are in harmony with their stated values to establish and uphold credibility with a wide range of external voices—voices ready to publicly share their opinions widely.

Moreover, the interconnectedness of today's global challenges underscores the importance of a holistic perspective. Climate change, for instance, cannot be addressed in isolation from economic and social factors. Communication strategies must, therefore, be multifaceted, addressing these issues in an integrated manner to rally diverse audiences.

As societal awareness of racial and economic inequities heightens, there is a pressing need to include marginalized voices to ensure diverse

perspectives are well-represented. This enriches the narrative and also bolsters community engagement and support. But simultaneously, it invites incredible pushback. We cannot turn back on guaranteeing equity for all and removing social determinants of health and opportunity. What is the solution? Examine your objectives and communications strategy, and know your audience, to guide internal and external actions.

Sustainability has emerged as a central theme in the discussion of purpose-driven communication. Organizations must demonstrate their commitment to environmental stewardship through measurement and messaging. This shift embraces a vision and commitment to ongoing dialogue with stakeholders about progress and challenges. Regardless of terms—whether 'ESG' (Environmental, Social, and Governance) is still in or removed from your lexicon—accountability for people and the planet's wellbeing is constant.

As we look ahead, the future of purpose and social impact in communications will continue to evolve. Technological advancements, such as AI and LLMs, and shifts in public sentiment toward privacy and data security, will present additional challenges and opportunities. However, the foundational principles of authenticity, inclusivity, and sustainability will remain constant guiding lights.

The insights and experiences my FINN Partners colleagues share offer a roadmap for navigating the complexities of modern communication in a world that simultaneously seeks and rejects purpose-centered efforts. Reading these articles enables leaders to hone their thinking and be prepared to contribute to a more just and equitable world. The journey is ongoing, and the role of communicators will be more critical than ever in shaping the future. This work is not just important; it's essential. Make a difference!





**FINN**

PARTNERS