


A Green Future: Resilient Brands and the Importance of Emphasizing Sustainability in Customer Communication

How digital customers feel connected to brands that prioritize more than just profit.

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Introduction

How to be preferred by the conscious consumer without ‘greenwashing’?

In an era where consumers increasingly prioritize sustainability in their purchasing decisions, clearly communicating sustainability initiatives is more important than ever. Recent data shows that the preference for shopping with sustainable brands has surged by nearly 25% and willingness to pay more for sustainable products has increased by 42% (Forbes 2024). However, consumers are becoming less forgiving of greenwashing attempts. This raises the question: **how effectively are brands integrating and promoting their sustainability strategies within their customer journey?**

Having a well-defined sustainability strategy helps avoid greenwashing, contributing to an authentic and trustworthy customer perception. However, integrating sustainable practices into a company’s customer journey and effectively communicating these efforts can present several challenges. For example: navigating operational hurdles, addressing communication gaps, and managing consumer perception issues. If companies have a robust sustainability strategy but fail to make customers aware of these efforts, it’s a significant missed opportunity. To enhance customer awareness on sustainability efforts, companies should ensure that the following five basic elements are visible in the customer journey:

- **Full transparency:** Build loyalty by showing all sustainability actions per journey stage, from supply to delivery, for both services and products.
- **FAQ with a section on sustainability:** Meet expectations by answering customer questions about your sustainability efforts.
- **Sustainability communication on all channels:** Enhance and expand your eco-conscious customer base by showcasing sustainability efforts across all communication channels.
- **A fair price:** Eco-friendly and socially responsible products are expected to cost a little more. Providing a fair price and explaining how this is built up will support customer understanding.
- **Honest & realistic data:** Be transparent about your achievements and avoid inflating numbers to prevent greenwashing.

Our vision:

A benchmark to assess how effectively companies communicate their sustainability initiatives to customers

Our latest benchmark aims to assess how effectively companies in the Netherlands and Belgium are embedding communication on their sustainability activities into the customer journey. This study encompasses 25 companies across six industry sectors.

The customer journey was segregated in five stages: Awareness, Research & Consideration, Purchase, Post-Purchase and Retention (Advocacy). Each stage was analyzed from a

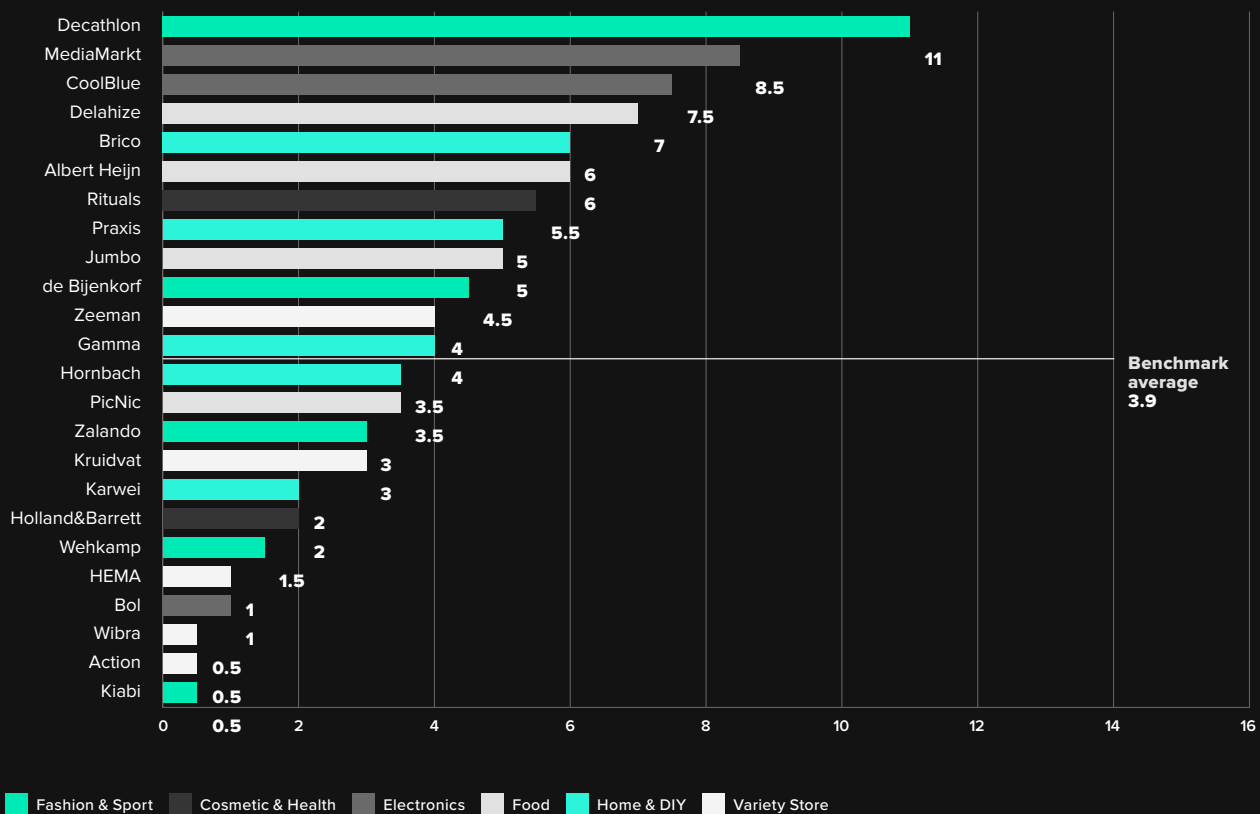
customer perspective, focusing on the online presence (web and app) and considering offline elements when applicable. This outside-in approach ensures that we capture the full customer experience regarding sustainability.

The evaluation focused not on the overall effectiveness of companies' sustainability strategies but rather on how well these strategies are communicated and promoted to consumers.



Key Findings:

Sustainability initiatives are often not clearly communicated & promoted



Decathlon leads the benchmark with a score of 11 out of 15, followed by **MediaMarkt** at 8.5 and **Coolblue** and 7.5. Despite having certain strategies in place, most companies are failing to effectively promote and clearly communicate their sustainability initiatives. Furthermore, we have seen that the Food sector had the highest average score of 5.4 out of 15, while Variety Stores scored the lowest, with an average of 1.7.

The results highlight a significant gap between having sustainability strategies and effectively communicating them. While some sectors and companies are promising, there is considerable room for improvement across the board. Consumers are increasingly savvy and expect transparency and authenticity in sustainability communications. Companies that fail to meet these expectations risk losing customer trust and loyalty.

The Results:

What improvements can be made in each of the five journey stages?

1. Awareness stage (average score: 0.8 / 3.0)

Many companies occasionally feature sustainability on their social channels, but the topic is not prominently placed on most websites. Commonly used measures include occasional posts on social channels about sustainability activities.

There are often dedicated sustainability pages that are placed in the footer navigation menu at the bottom of the page, and many fail to communicate a comprehensive sustainability strategy across their various communication channels. Benchmark best practices for creating more awareness on sustainability are:

- *Decathlon (3.0 / 3.0): Website section on second-hand items, social tutorials on how to extend the product lifetime (maintenance & 'buyback' your bike).*
- *Rituals (2.5 / 3.0): Top-of-page sustainability reporting on the website, dedicated social media sections showcasing sustainability efforts, generating awareness, and prominent 'B-Corp' Certification on the website.*

2. Research & Consideration stage (average score: 0.9 / 3.0)

The most common feature that many companies implement within the Re-

search & Consideration phase is product filters or dedicated menu categories for more sustainable choices, often using eco labels or certifications for products.

In this stage, key areas of enhancement are to: improve transparency regarding sustainability practices in product production, highlight the environmental benefits of choosing sustainable products or brands, and integrate sustainability factors into product selection tools (e.g., energy consumption for electronics or sustainability impact measurements). Benchmark best practices in this stage are:

- *Zalando (2.0 / 3.0): High standards for resellers (50% material must be sustainable), use of eco-labels, and filters for sustainable / pre-owned products.*
- *Kruidvat (2.0 / 3.0): Sustainable choice in all product tabs, sustainable private label products (diapers), partnership with GSES, paper bags for candy in-store.*

3. Purchase stage (average score: 0.7 / 3.0)

During the purchase phase, many companies fail to educate and guide customers on reducing the environmental impact of an order. Commonly used measures include 'collect' in-store, bike delivery within bigger cities, carbon-free shipping with and recyclable packaging.

Areas for improvement include: offering more education as well as guidance on the environmental impact of delivery and returns, such as providing better sizing information to reduce these returns. For the checkout, a possible improvement is to offer payment options with eco vouchers (e.g., Brico, Coolblue). Additionally, companies can improve by allowing customers to choose delivery timeframes that result in fewer emissions (e.g., Albert Heijn, Jumbo, and Picnic) and restricting orders below a certain threshold, to minimize multiple small orders (e.g., Albert Heijn). Benchmark best practices for this stage are:

- *Picnic (2.0 / 3.0): Electric delivery, return of plastic (delivery bags, bottles etc.), most sustainable delivery option selection and partnership with Sellpy (2nd hand reseller service).*
- *Albert Heijn (2.0 / 3.0): Restrictions on small orders, delivery when in the neighborhood, less plastics in packaging.*

4. Post-Purchase stage (average score: 0.8 / 3.0)

In the post-purchase stage, there is significant potential for improvements through services that support the circular economy or extend the product's lifetime. Commonly used measures include allowing the return of small items in-store, such as batteries, light bulbs, small electronics, clothes, and shoes.

For this stage, enhancing the customer experience can be achieved by providing incentives for using recycling or repair services. For after sales, it is important to proactively communicate services throughout the customer journey, in the case of returns, implementing charges may promote more responsible shopping behavior. Further enhancement can come from expanding repair services to include items beyond electronics to stimulate customer satisfaction. Additionally, integrating a marketplace for second-hand or refurbished items can also contribute to a better sustainability journey. Benchmark best practices for this stage are:

- *MediaMarkt (3.0 / 3.0): Refurbished products, repairs on products, and an outlet for used / damaged products.*
- *Decathlon (2.0 / 3.0): Maintenance, repair and 'buy back' options for products.*

5. Retention & Advocacy stage (average score: 0.7 / 3.0)

Many online brands have successful loyalty programs, but making those greener and actively engaging a community is often overlooked.

Improvements can be made by adding editorial content about sustainable living and promoting sustainable products within the loyalty program. This can be achieved by showcasing sustainable behavior through blogs, magazines, or loyalty applications. Additionally, avoiding services that support less sustainable behaviors is crucial. Additionally, providing opportunities for customers to share their sustainability efforts or experiences with the brand on social media can further enhance engagement. Benchmark best practices for this stage are:

- *Praxis (2.0 / 3.0): Praxis plus app to make your home more sustainable, information on government subsidies, and educational content.*
- *Decathlon (2.0 / 3.0): Large sustainability online community, extra points for loyalty customers when choosing sustainable options.*



Conclusion

Ensure customers perceive your sustainability efforts as intended

Brands should prioritize clear and effective communication of their sustainability initiatives to align with consumer expectations and preferences along the entire customer journey. Our benchmark reveals that while there is some progress, much work remains to be done. By improving sustainability communications, brands can enhance customer experience and build stronger, more trustworthy brands.

At Sia Partners, we have extensive experience in enhancing brand performance by helping clients effectively communicate their authentic sustainability strategies and efforts. We offer comprehensive support through our expertise in branding, digital marketing, customer journey design, loyalty, and relationship management, as well as sustainability and supply chain solutions. Additionally, we combine traditional management consulting with advanced technology, AI, and data science to deliver superior value to our clients.

As outlined in the results, there are multiple improvements to be made, along with a tailored list of actions for each company analyzed. Sia Partners can support the realization of a more sustainable journey, even if your company is not included in this benchmark. Do you want to:

- Define the future sustainability communication strategy (channels, targeting, web content and offering)?
- Understand how sustainable your sustainability communication is?
- Determine the best way to generate awareness and drive purchases from your customer journey by eco-minded consumers?
- Improve post-purchase engagement by integrating sustainability in your loyalty efforts?

Contact us for a short introductory call to learn more about our benchmark and discuss your challenges!

Your contacts

Katrien Watteyne

Partner, Retail & eCommerce
BRUSSELS, BELGIUM
katrien.watteyne@sia-partners.com

Maarten Jumelet

Senior Manager, Retail & eCommerce
AMSTERDAM, NETHERLANDS
maarten.jumelet@sia-partners.com

Monica Harmsen

Manager, Retail & eCommerce
AMSTERDAM, NETHERLANDS
monica.harmsen@sia-partners.com

About Sia Partners

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