

When Sustainability Meets Marketing: Why The Two Functions Belong On The Same Side Of The Boardroom

By Alice Ngatia

For years, many organizations have treated sustainability and marketing as if they belong to entirely different worlds. Sustainability has traditionally been positioned within the realm of compliance, reporting, risk management, and corporate responsibility while Marketing, has been viewed as the outward-facing function concerned with storytelling, campaigns, events, visibility, and customer preference. One is commonly thought to represent restraint and caution; the other embodies growth and ambition. One is seen as the moral conscience of the company; the other as its voice and public face.

That distinction, while somewhat accurate, is far too simplistic for the contemporary business environment we inhabit today. In reality, sustainability and marketing are two strategic disciplines fundamentally concerned with creating and protecting the long-term value of the organization.

Sustainability takes a long-term perspective on resources: examining how a business extracts, uses, renews, sources, and responsibly disposes of the materials and assets it requires to operate. Marketing, conversely, takes a long-term perspective on meaning: understanding how a business is perceived, trusted, chosen, remembered, and champi and stakeholders alike.

oned in the minds and hearts of customersand stakeholders alike.

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Understanding the Core Missions: Two Complementary Perspectives

The Substance Side: What Sustainability Brings to the Table

Sustainability enters any strategic conversation with difficult but absolutely necessary questions. How is the organization using energy, water, raw materials, human talent, land, and capital? Where do raw materials originate, and what are the human and environmental costs associated with their extraction? Is the company building a business model that merely extracts value from society and the natural world, or is it constructing something capable of genuine renewal, resilience, and fairness?

Sustainability challenges organizations to examine whether it can remain viable over time for people, the planet, and the enterprise itself.

Sustainability professionals understand that business viability depends on honest accountability. They ask uncomfortable questions that should ideally reveal structural vulnerabilities that could undermine competitive advantage over time.

The Translation Side: Marketing's Critical Role

Marketing on the other hand, enters this same strategic room from a distinctly different angle. It asks: What do our customers genuinely need, fear, desire, and value? What cultural shifts are emerging in the marketplace? What is the competitive narrative of our category, and where do we fit within it? How does our brand earn trust across diverse audiences with varying priorities? How do we position the company in a way that strengthens its relevance and market preference over time?

Marketing translates internal ambition into external meaning, and it converts external demand signals into internal action. This bridging function makes marketing indispensable for any organization seeking to understand and respond to market dynamics.

The Multilingual Nature of Both Functions

Strong marketers develop remarkable versatility, effortlessly speaking multiple corporate languages simultaneously. Similarly, sustainability has become increasingly multilingual within successful organizations. Rather than operating in isolation as a reporting desk tucked away in a forgotten corner of the business, sustainability professionals must engage fluently with diverse internal stakeholders.

Professionals in both fields must communicate effectively with legal teams, operations leaders, finance departments, product development groups, procurement specialists, human resources professionals, investor relations experts, and public affairs specialists.

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To move beyond aspiration and execute meaningful change, both functions must deeply understand and articulate the commercial logic of the organization. This fluency enables them to translate strategic objectives into actionable outcomes that resonate across departmental boundaries.

This common ground between sustainability and marketing is far greater than most organizational leaders initially recognize.

Both are fundamentally systems-thinking functions that rely heavily on insight gathering, interpretation of complex data, the ability to influence stakeholders, and skilful integration across organizational silos. Both must work effectively across traditional departmental boundaries to achieve their strategic objectives. Crucially, both help the organization respond to a world that is changing far faster than many conventional leadership models were ever designed to accommodate.

The real operational difference, lies in their primary lenses and starting points. While sustainability tends to begin with stewardship: that is the responsibility to manage resources in a way that preserves possibility and opportunity for future generations, marketing, by contrast, tends to begin with relationships, tasked the responsibility to understand and build meaningful value with stakeholders, particularly customers.

In the end however, these two lenses complement each other beautifully. Each function strengthens the other by providing essential perspective and capability.

Think of it this way: Sustainability helps the company become genuinely worth believing in. It establishes the authentic foundation upon which trust can be built. Marketing helps the company explain that worth, scale its impact, and protect that hard-earned credibility against competitive and reputational threats. Together, they create an integrated approach to value creation that neither could achieve alone.

The Integration Imperative

Kantar's 2025 Sustainability Sector Index found encouraging news: 22% of consumers are actively changing their shopping behaviour to purchase more sustainably, representing a $456 billion market opportunity projected to expand to $1 trillion by 2028. This represents a genuine economic incentive for organizations to get sustainability communication right.

However, the same research also revealed a sobering challenge: 52% of consumers believe companies distribute misleading or false information about their sustainability efforts. This is the trust deficit that organizations must overcome through authentic action from sustainability and honest communication from marketing. One without the other creates serious organizational weakness. Together, they create genuine strategic power that competitors cannot easily replicate.

Consider product development as a practical example. Sustainability professionals can guide decisions about materials selection, lifecycle impacts, recyclability, energy efficiency, supplier standards, and circular economy principles. Marketing professionals can test what customers will actually understand, adopt, and pay for; which language and framing resonates with different audiences; what friction points exist that might prevent adoption; and how to frame benefits in ways that drive actual purchase behavior.

Next, think about procurement and sourcing decisions. Sustainability asks critical questions about whether inputs are sourced responsibly, resiliently, and efficiently. Marketing asks what those sourcing choices mean for customer trust, brand narrative, market access, and category leadership. Most organizations treat procurement decisions as purely operational matters. Yet procurement decisions fundamentally shape the brand promise and customer experience, whether leaders actively realize it or not.

Another consideration could also be in talent acquisition and retention. Sustainability increasingly influences how employees evaluate whether a company's stated values are genuinely real or merely rhetorical. Marketing and employer branding determine how those values are communicated and experienced in actual daily work. A company cannot credibly claim to care about people and the planet in external marketing while breeding cynicism and disengagement internally. When this disconnect exists, employees inevitably become the first and most credible audience to stop believing the brand story.

Lastly, when it comes to the finance, strategy, and resilience, sustainability helps organizations develop sophisticated understanding of long-horizon risk and resource dependency while marketing helps translate those strategic shifts into growth strategy, pricing logic, innovation direction, and stakeholder confidence. This holistic view of brand-building creates far more resilient and defensible market positions.

Kantar's research suggests that sustainability perceptions alone can contribute up to 10% of the brand value of the world's top 100 brands.

This does not mean every organization should rush into vague, feel-good purpose language or sustainability claims without substance. In fact, the opposite is true. The point is not simply to sound sustainable or to adopt sustainability language. The point is to be strategically grounded and operationally honest enough that genuine sustainability meaningfully improves customer trust, strengthens brand predisposition, and delivers genuine competitive strength.

The Bottom Line

In a truly integrated model, the company's sustainability story should be written for all its stakeholders including the regulators, investors, customers, employees, communities, and future talent seeking employers aligned with their values.

This is ultimately not about making sustainability fashionable or turning environmental or social responsibility into a trend, rather it is about recognizing that in a crowded, skeptical, and resource-constrained world, brands will increasingly be judged not only by their promises but by tangible proof of delivery.

Proof alone, however, is insufficient if nobody understands it, sees it, or can verify it. Substance without story remains tragically under-leveraged and fails to deliver return on sustainability investment. Story without substance on the other hand, becomes dangerous, eroding trust when audiences discover the disconnection between claims and reality.

The future belongs decisively to organizations that see sustainability and marketing as genuine partners in brand-building and value creation.

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