

# COMMUNICATING YOUR SUSTAINABILITY EFFORTS

## A guide for accommodation businesses

Companies make great efforts to be more sustainable, but fail to communicate it convincingly to their customers in a way that it clearly shows how their experience will be superior. This is a missed opportunity to increase revenue, reduce seasonality, retain loyal customers and increase customer satisfaction. Taking seriously how you communicate sustainability will improve your overall efficiency, motivate staff and allow you to achieve more in less time.

Research has shown that there are many missed opportunities in communicating sustainability because firms are worried about green washing, but also because they haven't thought about how sustainability helps create unique experiences and how to communicate this message to customers.

Here are some tips to help you communicate your sustainability credentials.

### WHO DO I TELL?

*Figure out your target audience.* Is it clear who you have written your sustainability messages for? Picture the people that you want to be influenced by your message. You will have many types of customer, but it's still important to identify a segment large enough to make sustainability communications a viable business proposition.

The challenge for the marketer is to learn how to think like a customer and put the most favourable side of the story, the one that speaks to the selfish customer parting with hard earned cash. Why will sustainability be better for them, as a client?

### WHY DO I TELL?

*Write with a purpose.* Is the intention behind communicating sustainability clear?

In our research, customers thought a hotel using solar panels to heat hot water could only offer lukewarm showers and would avoid it. Make messages clear, and if there is a benefit for the customer, highlight it. If you are not sure, use humour as opposed to really formal, doom and gloom, policing style messages about 'turning down air conditioning to save the planet'.

### WHAT DO I TELL?

*It's all about content.* Is the message you put across appealing or listing facts? You want your customers to have better, more fulfilling experiences- so communicate first the aspects of sustainability that will help you achieve just that.

For example, a menu advertising 'sustainable food' isn't as likely to be as appealing as one offering 'locally sourced, fresh, authentic food'. You don't need to use sustainability language to make the sustainability aspect appealing to customers, in fact, it often works better if you don't.

### WHERE DO I TELL?

*Location, location, location.* There are so many places to talk about sustainability, and yet too many businesses have only a simple tab on their website called environmental policy. Match the contents to the most appropriate channel to communicate more effectively.

For example, use placemats at breakfast to make suggestions for days out, ensure messages about recyclable materials are near to them and bins are clearly labeled etc, put more detailed information online.

## WHEN DO I TELL?

*Timing.* Is your information appropriate for the decisions consumers need to make? First time customers need different information to repeat customers. And all customers have different information needs before travelling, on arrival, during their stay, and most importantly, to encourage recommendations and repeat purchases.

Be selective with your sustainability messages, and choose only those that will persuade the customer to book with you.

## HOW DO I TELL?

*Persuasiveness.* It's all about compelling language. Are your sustainability messages written in a way conducive to behavior change? Can they be easily understood?

Research shows that when customers understand the consequence of their actions or part of the bigger picture, they are more likely to act. Messages can influence customer behaviour differently. For example, when faced with the message 'most clients staying in this room reuse their towels', 65% of guests did the same, compared to 'most clients staying in this hotel...' (45%) or simply saying 'please reuse your towels' (under 30%). Make your message relevant to the customer's situation.

## FROM STRATEGY TO IMPLEMENTATION

If you are comfortable with the six previous points, it is time to apply these throughout your communication channels, and nowhere more important than your website and your social media. Without good communication platforms, you will struggle to put your message across.

In the following column are three key principles for consideration.

## BE RELIABLE

*Quality is king.* Your website's content must be up to date and accurate if you want to be taken seriously. Ensure your website is clearly branded, consistent and updated regularly.

## BE SMART

*Performance.* After accuracy, your website must be user-friendly. It must do the job well, seamlessly taking your customers from one step to the next. If using your website is an effort, you will lose sales. Decide how much you want to hide or make sustainability prominent, where it belongs, how you use it, and test different propositions.

Information should be placed where it helps the customer make decisions. For example, if you'd like to recommend arriving by public transport, don't hide it in the environmental policy, highlight it in the 'how to get here' section. To convince your guests further, include suggestions on things to do nearby that do not require a car.

## BE SOCIAL

*Connectivity.* Use sustainability messages for social media content. Sustainability gives you content and a reason to engage in conversation with past and prospective customers.

Social media will allow you to demonstrate your sustainability credentials in a fun and engaging way. Upload pictures, for example, if you're gardens attract local wildlife, of your herb garden in full bloom, or an authentic dish prepared by your chef. Tell guests about what's happening in the hotel, and give tips on the local area to encourage guests to visit again. The only limit is your creativity!

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