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Sustainability reports have a big task: communicate complex data, tell a story of change, highlight results, and detail goals, commitments and milestones – all while conveying alignment to the company’s core values, staying true to the organization’s purpose and navigating the diverse interests of multiple stakeholders.

As sustainability reporting has expanded, best practices have emerged. So, too, have mistakes that hinder the effectiveness of today’s ESG reports.

Here are the top 10 mistakes that we see in sustainability reports... and how to avoid them:

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**1.**

ESG is part of your brand – a representation of who you are, what you stand for and how you are positioned. Companies that exemplify ESG as an integral part of their DNA – from their purpose and values to their overall business and operating strategy – will gain trust instead of cynicism, from the stakeholders that matter most.

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**2.**

ESG is not solely an investor issue. Make information and data relevant and understandable to multiple stakeholders including employees, customers, community influencers and suppliers. This can be achieved by bringing data to life with examples and case studies, avoiding industry jargon and acronyms, while defining important terms and explaining what the data means.

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**3.**

Context is key. Explain what the data means and why it is important – this will increase its impact and help demystify your business. Through clear narrative, glossaries and data visualization you can show how your data demonstrates progress towards your company’s goals.

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**4.**

Conversely, a thoughtful and carefully worded narrative that offers no relevant data points misses an opportunity to build credibility and articulate progress. Ratings agencies and indexes are using AI (artificial intelligence) and algorithms to find and interpret your data – if the data set they are looking for isn’t there, your company will not be found or included.

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**5.**

Design should be a strategic tool utilized to create a report that is engaging to read, clear to understand and makes information easy to find. Strategic use of infographics, illustrative or photographic imagery, color, call outs and even white space will help simplify and amplify salient messages. On the other hand, don’t fall into the trap of “form over substance.”

SUSTAINABILITY REPORTS: TOP 10 MISTAKES (CONTINUED)

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**6.**

The launch of your sustainability report is an opportunity to market your company to a number of different constituents. Highlight it on your homepage, issue a press release with a direct link to the report and create a series of social media posts to drive traffic. Take it further by repurposing content for use in other channels, including other areas of your site, your recruiting materials, your investor communications and your sales and marketing.

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**7.**

A strong story can quickly convey the meaning behind your data or message. Letting a piece of data speak for itself with no context can lead to misinterpretation and misunderstanding. Case studies or vignettes don't just liven up your report, they can actually help create clarity, strengthen understanding and increase recall.

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**8.**

Your sustainability report is an opportunity to lay out goals, describe the steps you are taking to get there and provide transparent progress over time. By connecting the dots between what, when and how, you will build trust and credibility with readers.

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**9.**

Your report should emphasize quality over quantity and put forth metrics that have a clear connection to meaningful, relevant issues for your employees, communities and investors. You should avoid disclosure for the sake of disclosure and let metrics drive substantive change.

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**10.**

Discussion of sustainability should be foundational to a company's message and communications strategy rather than tangential. Find ways to reach multiple stakeholders and integrate ESG goals, messages, metrics and achievements into other communications materials and channels year-round. Incorporate ESG communications into your website, public relations, internal communications, recruiting activities, sales, marketing, proxy statements and ongoing investor communications and social media.

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The above mistakes can be viewed as opportunities for improvement in your next Sustainability Report. At the end of the day, a well written and designed sustainability report that takes advantage of today's communications best practices will ensure you are communicating your message clearly and delivering a content-rich story that is compelling, understandable, memorable and easy to read.