



Packing vast sustainability knowledge into smaller servings can increase the impetus to act for consumers and organisations alike.  
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# Let's pack sustainability into smaller servings this year

Lofty green goals can be achieved when approached as tractable actions; greenwashing can also be reduced. **BY ANG HUI MIN AND LAWRENCE LOH**

A NEW year smells of a fresh start. Sustainability has seen both the good and bad in 2023, with increasing greenwashing incidents but also tighter regulations across the world. In 2024, an approach to packing sustainability into smaller and easier-to-understand servings may tilt the needle towards the good.

When sustainability is viewed as a lofty goal, achieving it may seem too monumental, a deadline years into the too-distant future. Behavioural change, deviating from the unsustainable habits of the past, may easily get thwarted. Or they may head in the wrong direction.

Numerous brands, such as Coca-Cola, Lufthansa and Nike, were called out for greenwashing in 2023. In December, the Advertising Standards Authority of Singapore deemed a video advertisement about a Prism+ air-conditioner to be misleading in its environmental claims. This was the first time that the authority found a company to be in breach of advertising regulations relating to greenwashing.

On a wider scale, a study by the Centre for Governance and Sustainability at the National University of Singapore (NUS) Business School found that over half of online products' environmental claims were vague or could not be substantiated with evidence.

Behind misleading claims could be an intention to deceive. But they could also stem from unfamiliarity with sustainability and regulations.

The concept stretches beyond reducing carbon emissions or water and energy usage.

For organisations, sustainability extends to supply chain, risk and finance considerations. For consumers, leading a sustainable lifestyle includes considering the broad environmental impact of potential purchases. Hence, packing vast sustainability knowledge into smaller servings can increase the impetus to act for both consumers and organisations alike.

Assuming an organisation has already charted its sustainability vision, the next step would be to break down what that means for stakeholders such as employees, partners and customers.

Think of tailored sustainability resource

toolkits. Employees would understand what sustainable operations for their unit look like, what metrics to track, and common pitfalls to avoid. The information could be communicated through infographics, checklists or jargon-free videos.

For example, in launching the NUS Sustainable Procurement Framework, the university's Central Procurement Office included a listicle of guiding principles and a graphic on the framework highlights.

With prospective partners and customers, sustainability collaborations and initiatives could be presented in manageable portions, for instance project descriptions, beneficiaries, resources, timelines and progress reports, such as those on the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal Actions Platform.

In the "smaller serving" approach, employees stand to be more engaged as they better appreciate how their actions contribute to the larger sustainability goal. Partners, customers and even regulators can also clearly and better evaluate an organisation when its sustainability efforts are transparent and easy to understand.

## Communicating efforts

Organisations can refer to local codes of advertising practice to learn the do's and don'ts in environmental communication. There are also numerous online resources for avoiding greenwashing. Just in October 2023, the Asia chapter of the Public Relations and Communications Association released the Guidelines on Environmental Sustainability Claims, a resource for practitioners.

Amid all the advice, three tips stand out:

- Consider the overall impact of the product or service;
- Be ethical, don't deceive; and
- Substantiate your claims.

In the case of missing evidence, organisations need to go back to the drawing board. Plans need to be charted. Impact needs to be achieved before being publicised. It is short-term publicity exchanged for long-term credibility.

For individuals, leading a sustainable lifestyle may also seem like a lofty goal.

Consumers in Asia-Pacific were willing to pay more for sustainable products in gener-

al, according to a 2022 report by Bain & Co. Out of 16,000 consumers surveyed, 90 per cent said they were willing to pay the sustainability premium. However, few did so in practice due to a lack of information, a mistrust of sustainability claims and low availability of sustainable products.

A possible option may be to break down sustainable lifestyles into bite-sized pieces: seeking information, planning and habits.

Consumers aware of environmental issues would know that cars and planes, despite more efficient technologies, are still emitting pollutive gases, and hence reduced car or plane rides are better than more rides with efficient engines. In deciding whether a product is eco-friendly, these consumers would also know to check for substantiation and clear comparison levels in the promotional materials.

Planning the day's schedule may also help to reduce consumption. For example, if one plans to get takeaway lunch from the hawker centre, he could prepare an appropriate food container in the bag the night before. Or if one plans to visit the supermarket, then he should bring enough reusable bags for groceries.

Individuals can choose to adopt sustainable habits, one at a time. It's easier to make one change rather than many changes all at once. Shortening the air-conditioning hours at night sounds feasible. Doing that plus cycling to work and growing vegetables at home seems daunting. Accumulation of the right habits will pave the way for a sustainable lifestyle.

In conclusion, lofty sustainability goals can be achieved when they are viewed as tractable actions to take. When sustainable practices become habitual, be they for individuals or organisations, we will be nearer to our goal. Indeed, for sustainability and to eradicate greenwashing, small can be beautiful.

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