

Keep

it

real

**Green-waving,
not greenwashing**

BOTTLE

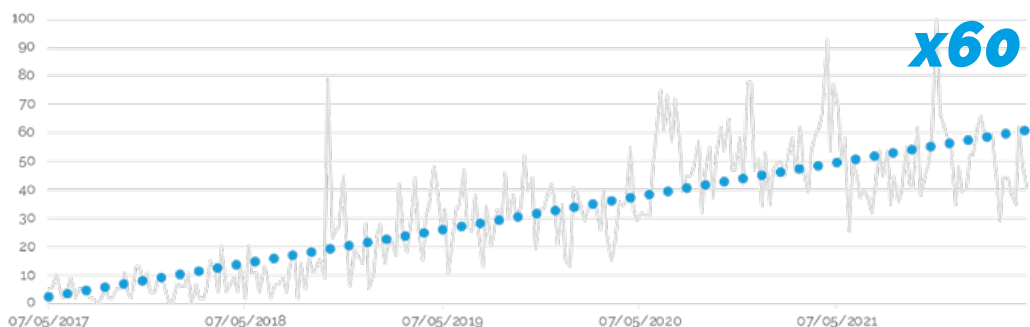
www.wearebottle.com

Greenwaving

An introduction

Consumers' interest in the sustainability credentials of brands has been growing significantly over the last five years.

UK searches for "Sustainable brands"



And this kind of Google trends picture is similarly reflected across other measures - like mentions in social media and online media.

That interest (it's more than interest, consumers are actively researching) comes alongside the growing scepticism of 'greenwashing'.

Brands have been called-out - by consumers and by the ASA - for making overblown and misleading claims of their sustainability.

How should brands communicate their sustainability efforts, whether it involves 'educating' consumers to change their own behaviours, or helping them make better-informed choices?

We looked at a number of leading brands in the Food & Drink category, and measured their success in telling sustainability stories in the media, which attracted a (net) positive sentiment. Same for social media.

And we measured their performance in answering the queries people ask in search, and the strength of their onsite sustainability content.

The best performing - in this Digital PR arena - are the brands who patiently, maybe studiously, build their credibility and reputation. Mind you, the patience of their storytelling is still accompanied by an impatience for progress on green goals.

But they are less likely to be shouting loud and going for the big gestures, stunts and experiential grandstanding. They are (green)waving to attract attention, rather than climbing onto a soapbox with a megaphone.

The Google criteria of E-A-T (expertise, authority, trust) is a good set of watchwords across all sustainability comms channels.

We've also added our own five takeouts - the 'greenwaving' best practices that we observed - to steer brands' fame and findability.

Brands and businesses have a big role in leading change, we hope this might help.

We looked at 18

Food and Drink

brands



Beers



Teas



Biscuits



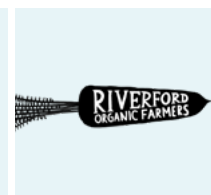
Honey



Water



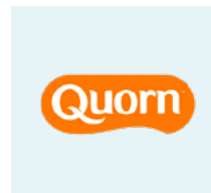
Veg Box



Plant-based milk



Meat-free



Snacks



BOTTLE

...and measured these things in their

sustainability comms

Greenwaving Fame

Media Voice and Sentiment

Relative volume of mentions for sustainability topics in UK media, and the sentiment

Social Voice and Sentiment

Relative volume of mentions for sustainability topics in social media, and the sentiment.

Greenwaving Findability

Search Prominence

How high is the Google ranking of brands' results for "category + sustainable + brands" searches.

Content Findability

Traffic and backlinks to sustainability pages on the website.

Content Authority

Relative Authority Score of sustainability pages compared to overall site.

And found these to be the highest ranked

Greenwaving Fame



Greenwaving Findability



Greenwaving Overall



And found these factors, for the

Highest performers

Green-Doing

Have real things that show, not just tell.

Signature Focus

Be specific, make choices.

Earn Authority

Use endorsers, 'kite marks', influencers.

Bold Humility

Be open about gaps, shortcomings, struggle.

Generous Kinship

Create alliances, recognise others.



Green-Doing

Have real things that show, not just tell

"If a tree grows in a rewilded forest and you don't takeover Trafalgar Square – did it really happen?"

That might be how many brands still think about their PR storytelling for sustainability initiatives.

But in a world where greenwashing accusations zoom-in at the speed of a TikTok post, big and brash PR stunt-y tactics look – at best – a bit tone-deaf, and at worst are self-defeating.

Just like the content-aesthetic for authentic social posts looks increasingly lo-fi, so a more patient kind of understatement is more appropriate for building a credible sustainability reputation.

It's why we see 'green-doing' as an important factor, and that it's accompanied by long-term (and generous, thoughtful) commitments.

And with those long-term commitments comes a subtler type of storytelling.

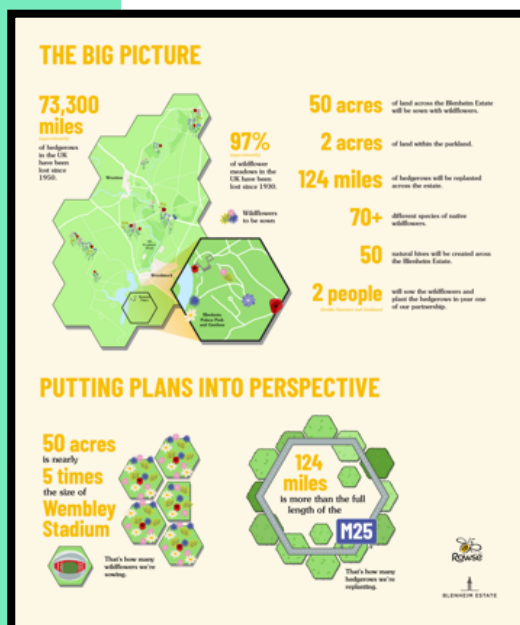
'Solution-storytelling' – informative, helpful-to-the-audience; an educative how-to style may be the best skew for the comms plan.

If it feels like you – the brand – are the 'hero' of the story, riding gallantly to save the world, then it's probably wrong.

The old Dutch maxim, that "trust arrives on foot and leaves on horseback" has an ever-heightened importance in getting this balance right between greenwaving, and greenwashing.

Both fame, and findability, can be cumulative rather than big-bang and instantaneous.

And your consumer should be the hero of the story, with you as the 'mentor', helping them to learn and change and improve. This principle, shared beautifully by **Jonah Sachs** in **'Winning the Story Wars' [4 min watch]** keeps the brand-voice in check.





BOTTLE



The punk tactics of Brewdog shook the conventional world of drinks brands and brewing since they first drove rings round the Bank of England in tanks, or making an IPA with Putin's face on the label, with the hashtag #notforgays.

Their disruptive attitude might be hard to dial-down though, so when Brewdog bought a large tract of land in Scotland, to grow a carbon-capturing forest, their shout-loud tendencies ran ahead of their doing. And media scrutiny found inconsistencies, mostly unnecessary exaggerations which Brewdog might see as 'rounding-errors' but it was enough to tilt the media and social sentiment to a net-negative.

Patience might not be a natural default for some brands, or their agencies, bred on the big, the bold and the braggadocio of brand-building.

But it looks out of place for sustainable, sustainability communications in earned media.

Our leading greenwaving brands have all taken their time, and grown (literally, in many cases) their actions ahead of their media storytelling.

Rowse honey have over a decade of their Hives for Lives 'green-doing', and now a long-term commitment to a project to establish pollinator habitat with Blenheim Estate.

Clipper were the first fairtrade tea brand, and have spent more than 25 years adding improvements to their products' climate impact as well as to the lives of their growers.

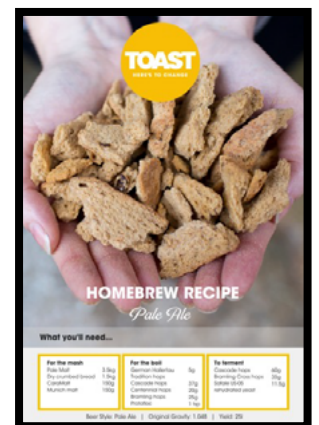
It's not as though your brand needs decades to have built that reputation. It's more about the care you take, the emphasis on do-first, speak second, and keeping the consumer in the hero's saddle.

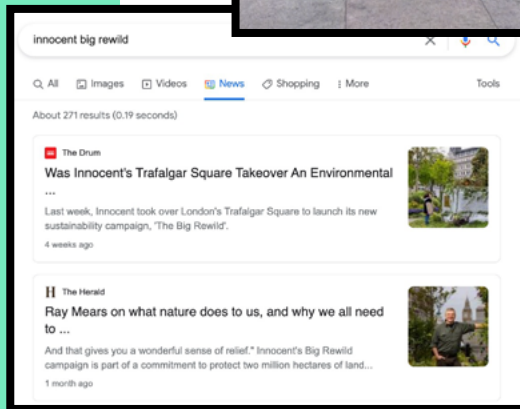
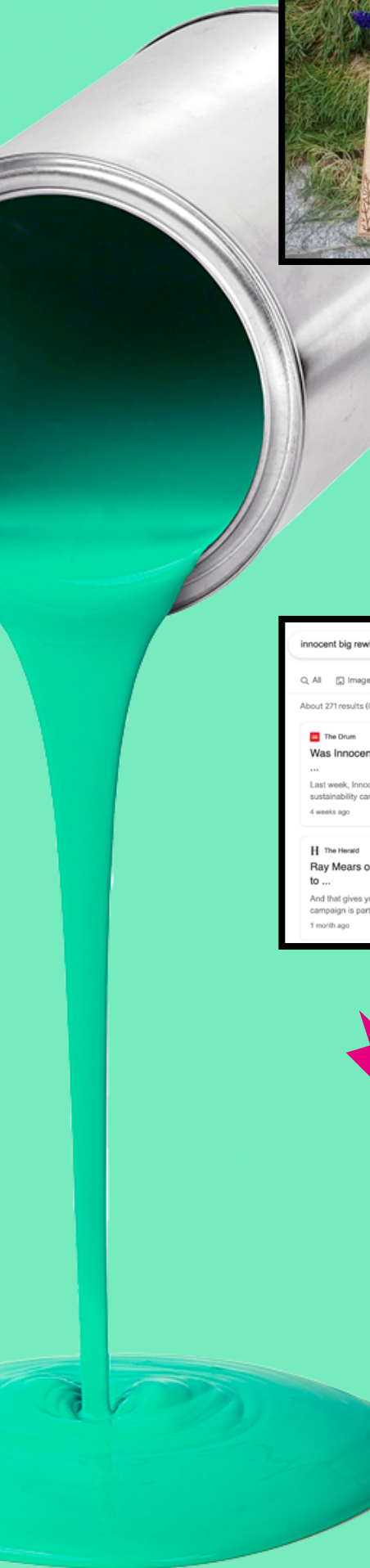
'Doing' can be as thoughtful, unselfish, and

yet understated as Toast Ale showing how to make your own beer from bread.

Disruptive-and-effective might look more like getting together with 25 of **your 'competitors'**, to highlight the need for change at COP 26.

Effectiveness looks doubtful when the 'showing' is louder than the 'doing'.





Ellen Miles' 'hack' of Innocent Smoothies' rewilding of Trafalgar Square had 1.3M views on TikTok – almost x100 more than **Innocent Drink's own post on the same channel.**

Ellen's greenwashing accusation wasn't really about innocent being misleading. Her judgement was more about style, over substance. She said,

"There was no meaty information or tips there for people, other than putting Innocent's logo on a pithy thing saying, like: 'We like plants.'"

Looking like an advert can be damning enough to tip effectiveness into negative-sentiment.

Making yourself the hero, is what it looks like – even when you're ready with the explanations, the calculations (in innocent's case, the carbon emissions they avoided or minimized in the making of the stunt).

The stunt's organisers, Frank, said "The 'Big Rewild' needed a big, bold statement to match the size of Innocent's pledge and commitment, which is why we came up with such an epic moment for Londoners and the UK to enjoy and learn from."

Whether it's about communicating 'pledges' before 'results', or scaling the telling to proportions that invite face-value scepticism, Ellen Miles' may be the kind of grass-roots response that paralyses marketing directors and brand managers.

And, no amount of post-rationalisation, or sincere engagement with critics, or even pushing for greater clarity on the ASA's 'greenwashing' code, is going to rescue well-intentioned brands from the swift judgement of social media activists.



Pro Tip: As a recent celebrity court case found, pledging is not synonymous with doing, so do – then tell...and let the size of the action be greater than the scale of the statement.

Signature Focus

Be specific, make choices

Fame, more than findability, needs focus.

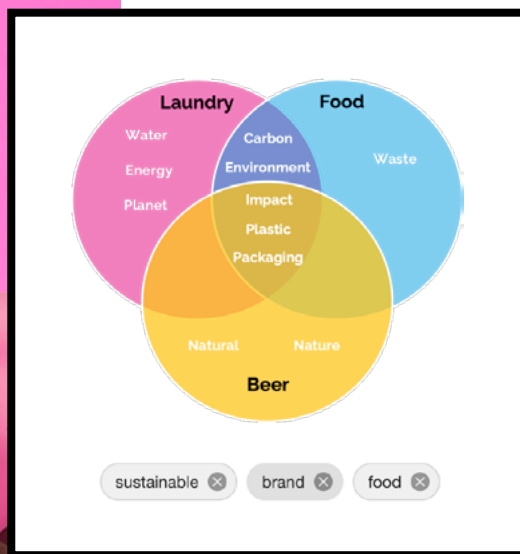
Rightly, many brands' sustainability efforts, policies and manifestos will span a range of issues from carbon emissions, recyclability, energy and biodiversity.

The story of the breadth of your activities belongs on your website, where the already-intrigued can discover how comprehensive your plans are.

Offsite, media stories should be more focused.

We found that the leading brands in our greenwaving study were better at focusing like this, in their comms.

For Toast Ale, it's food waste. For Rowse, it's protecting bees. For Highland Spring, it's recycling.



Brands' findability strategy might have a set of topics, to optimize.

For fame – pick one, your signature focus.

Examining different categories – like food, beer, laundry – we found they tend to have their own focal topics.

Identifying which of these will be the prominent strand of your own sustainability comms means you will be more credible – consumers don't expect or believe that a brand can be effective across everything.

As David Ogilvy said, "Strategy is sacrifice."

And the 'halo' may develop from there. Evidence both from **Google**, and from **academic research**, suggests that consumers see effective sustainability reputation as synonymous with a 'high quality' brand.



Earn Authority

Use endorsers, 'kite marks', influencers



Both greenwashing fame and findability - as well as mid-funnel metrics in social, like engagement - can benefit from the earned authority of partnerships.

Just like our other greenwashing success factors, this works best with a patient, earned approach (which some brands and their agencies might find challenging.)

Most of these relationships are still commercial to some extent. You will pay to become a B Corp, and many influencers have agents - but the best are still 'earned' because they are scrupulous. They will insist on you proving brand integrity, before offering their endorsement.

And in turn, their endorsement earns media visibility for sustainability comms.

Rowse honey have a number of influential partners for their Hives for Lives programme to protect pollinator habitats and biodiversity for honeybees, and beekeepers.

Long-running relationships - supporting academic research at Sussex University, development work in Africa with Bees for Development, as well as a household name like Jimmy Doherty as their conservation expert - form a complementary 'collective'.

Patently nurturing these relationships can create opportunities, and ideas, for mutually beneficial communications and a kind of flywheel-effect.

Pro Tip: Consider how your sustainability comms could benefit from a network of partners, rather than one single 'brand ambassador'.



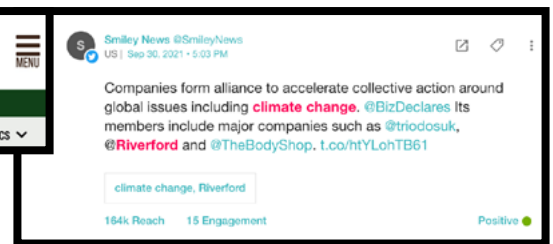
Social reach, as well as endorsement, comes from engagement and shares from advocates.

@HughFW is a long-time 'friend' of Riverford – with shared values leading to many collaborations.

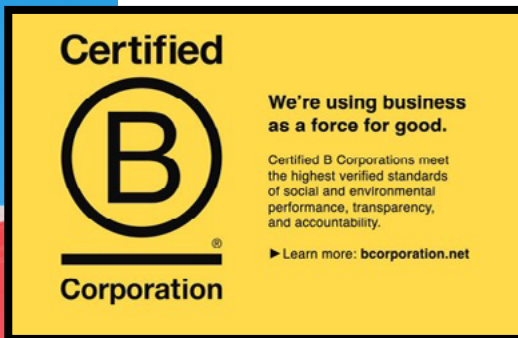
An engagement from Hugh gives the message an increased social reach of 121K. The endorsement from Smiley News brings another 164K.

Riverford have two social platforms – the brand and the brand publication they've created – 'Wicked Leeks.'

This separation may be historic; it's not clear why the same content couldn't be published directly by Riverford.



Pro Tip: Take care structuring your brand publishing. Riverford have made Wicked Leeks a subdomain. There are **pros and cons** (for SEO, and for audiences) between subdomain, or subfolder, or microsite.



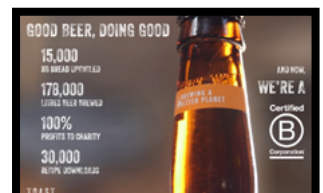
Eight of the eighteen brands in our analysis are certified B Corporations.

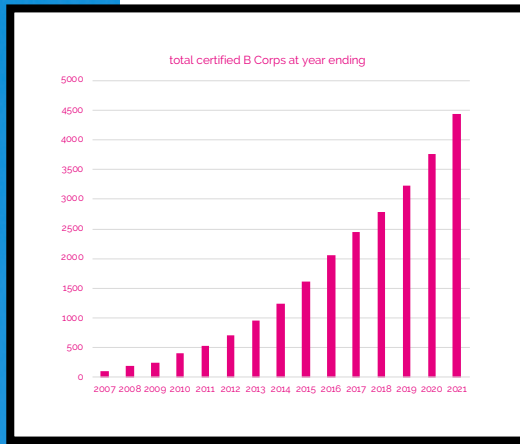
B Corp certification has become one of the most respected 'kite marks' a standard to assess "that a business is meeting high standards of verified performance, accountability, and transparency on factors from employee benefits and charitable giving to supply chain practices and input materials."

Its breadth is possibly both its strength, and its weakness, as a singular standard.

While labels like Rainforest Alliance, Soil Association, and Fairtrade mean one-thing, and are awarded to specific products, B Corp certification scrutinises a company's entire operations.

The B Corp badge is a simple, but increasingly powerful, way of communicating a business's sustainable ethos to clients, employees, partners and investors.





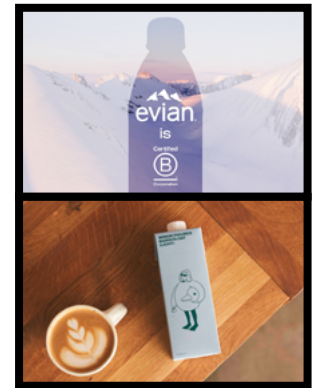
Perhaps it has yet to become as widely understood, and meaningful, for consumers – but that may soon change.

In Feb 2021 online retailer Ocado grouped B Corp brands into a dedicated 'aisle' on its online store.

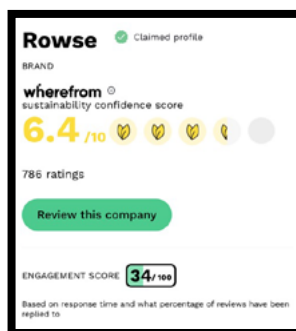
With around 1,100 products from 35 sustainable companies - including Ben & Jerry's ice cream, Ella's Kitchen, Cheeky Panda, Teapigs tea, Innocent smoothies, and Alpro's non-dairy milk alternatives – the move may lead to a growing consumer awareness for the value of the B Corp standard.

Full B Corp certification is certainly hard-earned, often requiring a long process of data gathering, as well driving changes in processes, practices and supply chain partners.

And it can be costly, not just in time and resources; a for-profit company with at least a year of operations can apply but will have to part with between £500 to £50,000 to do so, depending on its turnover.



Pro Tip: Consider the consumer's understanding of any potential 'kite mark' as well as how it endorses the best purposeful focus for the business and the brand.



In our analysis, Rowse honey are one of the most findable brands in online search for their sustainability stories, with strong authoritative content, traffic and backlink profile.

They have also engaged with another destination online where consumers' searches may lead.

wherefrom.org is a crowd-sourced sustainability ratings site for brands, and by claiming your brand-profile you can use it to engage with the positive, and not-so-positive comments from consumers, and learn from their attitudes. Other

sites which rank highly for searches, like **ethicalconsumer.org** apply their own criteria to score brands.

Pro Tip: Opportunities to 'listen' to consumers' views are an invaluable influence on content creation. Use these insights – as well as search insights from platforms like **answerthepublic** to make your own content findable.



Bold Humility



Be open about gaps, shortcomings, struggle

"All things considered", "perhaps surprisingly" – **Highland Spring** take a clear, honest (bold) tone when addressing their answer to the question – "why still plastic?".

Sometimes called the '**Blue Planet effect**' – consumers still see plastic as a bellwether issue in judging environmental and sustainable actions by packaged brands.

Research by Google showed a 60% increase in searches for 'Recycling and Plastics' over a recent 12 month period.

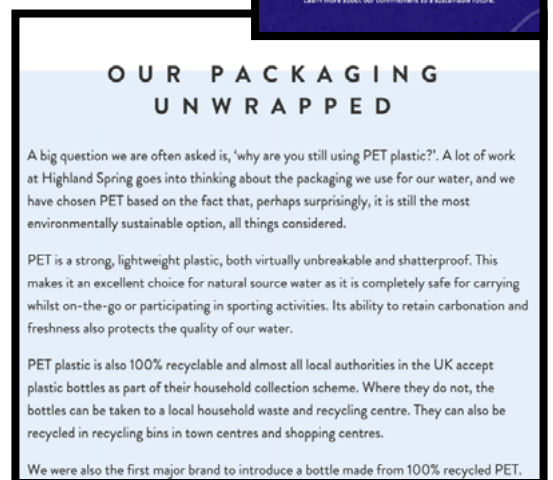
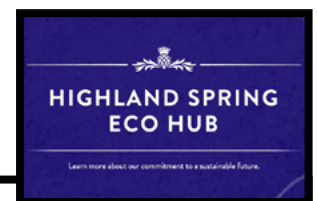
Highland Spring have concluded that plastic is still the best solution for now. It's a decision that needs to overcome some expectations, that needs to be set out, holistically.

Having your version of an 'Eco Hub' easily findable and well backlinked gives a chance to share the more subtle factors in decisions that might seem counterintuitive.

In our analysis, Highland Spring could still do more to build the search visibility of their 'answer'.

It performs well for branded searches, but for more generic terms like "most sustainable bottled water" their Eco Hub ranked 18.

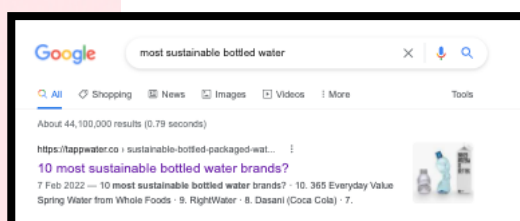
That's down on page 2 of Google, where most searchers never get to.



But they're the second highest ranked brand, just behind **source**.

And the review site **tappwater** – ranked first for the generic search – has Highland Spring favourably listed in its own top 10.

If only Highland Spring chased tappwater for the backlink (the other brands listed on their site have a link).





Pro Tip: Regularly check your coverage and online mentions with a tool like Meltwater. Ask for a backlink every time, ideally to your content hub.

Editorial PR stories don't always allow much room for nuanced explanations and depth – they're best for impactful (fame) messages, and for simpler, informative solution-storytelling.

Getting a backlink to owned content, on your sustainability hub, gives audiences a chance to 'find out more', and hopefully the opportunity for you to share your sincere efforts, and your struggle.

Riverford make good use of this opportunity, answering the kinds of questions that undoubtedly get asked (in search, and IRL).

Why don't you send all your veg loose?
Some packaging is a necessary evil. Moist, leafy veg such as lettuces and spinach wilt and lose quality quickly in contact with the air. Without paper to shade them, potatoes turn green. And loose root veg (a system we tried many years ago) roll around and make a mess of both the clean produce and the boxes.
We must always balance the environmental impact of packaging against the impact of the food waste that would occur if we didn't use it.
Although we can't be rid of the stuff completely, we do work hard to use only what's necessary to preserve the quality of the produce.

They do it in a tone that conveys the seriousness of their wrestling with the issues and trying to the make best-choices (for now).

Any concerns?
As with any major change, there are a few risks - but we've considered carefully how to mitigate them.
• Some home compostable materials can be confused with normal plastics, so we have very clearly labelled what they are and how to dispose of them
• We only use home compostable packaging made from sustainable, non-GM and, where derived from trees, FSC-accredited materials
• Compostable materials can lead to increases in littering. We trust our customers, and are educating everyone on how to dispose of the new packaging responsibly

Bold language like "necessary evil" shows they aren't ducking the issue, but they've taken the time and effort to "balance the environmental impact".

Expertise, with authority, builds trust. E-A-T.

They share the struggle, the decision-making tussle. It doesn't sound easy (because it isn't) but it's all the more credible for that.

Here's another brand sharing their "...many inconvenient and uncomfortable decisions".

Oatly wasn't a top-3 in our analysis, despite examples like this - of perhaps the bold(est) sort of humility.

Maybe time will tell whether their long-form statements – responding to to online roars of disappointment from many former advocates who learned that one of Oatly's financial backers are Blackstone – help draw the sting of that criticism.

It would help if this content was more findable – better linked – from coverage, so that more queries might be referred to their own side of the story.

Oatly had one of the strongest 'voices' (social and online media mentions) in our analysis. Actively using this volume, to link to statements like this, would in turn grow their search visibility for consumers' research queries.

As it stands, consumers' searches are more likely to lead them to find the (usually) unfavourable judgement of other sites.

Pro Tip: Frank language, and brand tone-of-voice, can still be written in more search-accessible ways. Think about creating sub-headers, in long articles like these, that relate to the search queries consumers are actually using.

CHANGE ISN'T EASY

Oatly was founded on the idea of change. Our entire reason for existence has been to bring change and transparency to existing food systems that are currently responsible for 25% of global greenhouse gas emissions, half of which come from the meat and dairy industry.
Our Idea was, and still is, to offer plant-based options that are so amazing, the general public doesn't feel like it is a compromise to eat them. In doing so we can trigger a shift to a more sustainable world. This journey, however, has resulted in many inconvenient and uncomfortable decisions. On multiple occasions, we've found ourselves stepping on the toes of both our friends and those who disagree with our mission, and now we've gone and done it again.

Generous Kinship

Create alliances, recognise others

Similar to growing your brand's online authority through endorsement, this greenwaving factor is about relationships, but primarily about sharing your own endorsement with others, generously.

Many of our leading brands actively initiate relationships with other brands and share their sustainability kudos.

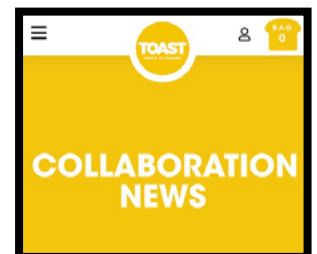
Toast Ale – number one in our report – are experts at fame-building through collaborations.

Often, but not exclusively, this is at the product-level.

'Companion' beers with brands like **Rubies in the Rubble** and **Oddbox** give a campaign-focus to particular issues, from climate change to biodiversity.

Collaborations also grow online visibility through reciprocal links, and quirky collabs add to fame-making coverage opportunities like this in highly viewed site **Mashable**.

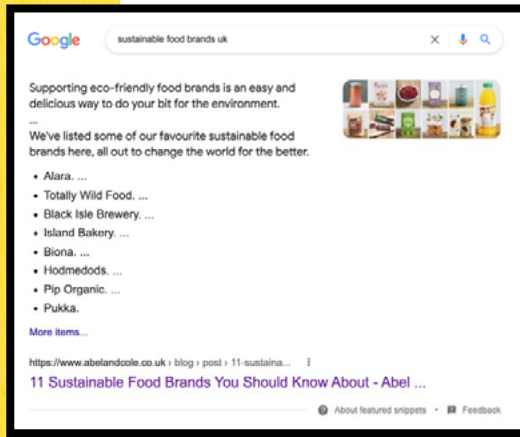
Well-chosen kinship, even arising from a supplier-relationship like **Clipper Tea + the National Trust**, can spark new ideas for campaigns and fame-building **sustainability initiatives**.



One of the simplest, entry-level – and most effective – types of generous kinship is to give a good old shout-out to other brands you admire.

Do it spontaneously, or make it a regular part of your own content planning. It can be thematic, or based on calendar moments and awareness days to add topicality.

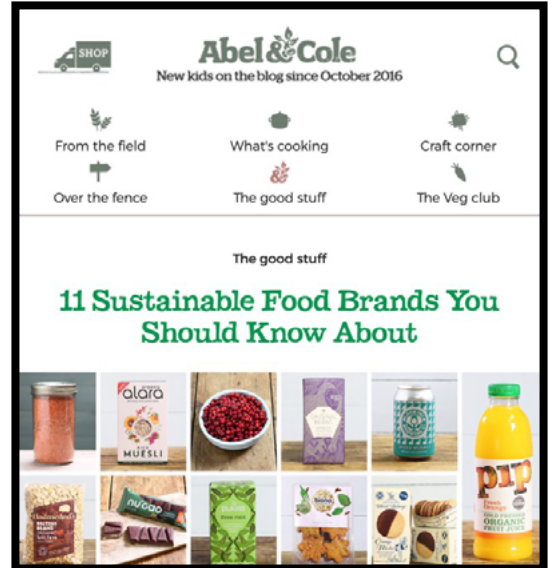




Pro Tip: You might develop a list like this into something that becomes an index, that could be worthy of PR coverage, if your own brand-authority is strong. Make sure you backlink to other brands, they'll be pretty sure to link back to you, too.

Abel & Cole, with their own highly visible blog, use this approach to list their fave sustainable food brands.

Because it serves a consumer search term well, their blog ranks position 1 for 'sustainable food brands uk' – good for Abel & Cole, and good for the brands they list.



Greenwaving



Wrap-up

Consumer interest in brands' sustainability has never been higher, but it comes with a critical interrogation of the credibility of claims.

Big stunts, with the brand itself in a 'hero' role, may bring more scepticism – and negative sentiment – that outweighs the usual PR goals of widespread coverage and reach.

Instead, taking time to build a reputation – and an online visibility that ensures your story is found in search - is the route to establishing a strong leadership in sustainability comms.

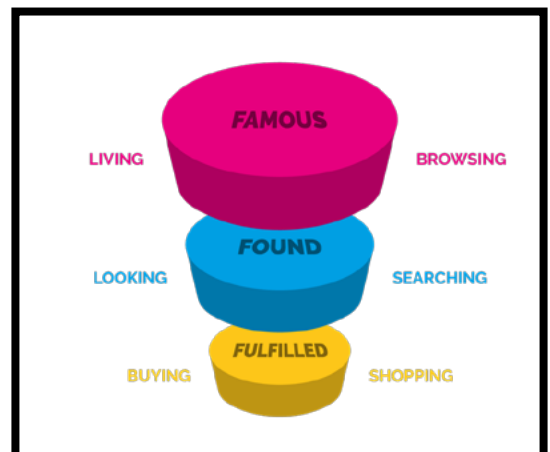
It's a more patient-approach, but it's all the more believable for that.

Campaigns, combined with onsite content that aims to be generous, helpful, informative, can add-up to the preference in consumers' decision-making.

And a humble tone-of-voice, transparent about the struggle, the current challenges – and honest about the focus the brand has chosen – supports that credibility.

Becoming known through the company you keep, whether it's brand partnerships, endorsers, and scrupulous influencers, will help earn that respect, and could contribute to the **brand-halo** that Google and other **academic research** has shown.

Patient fame-building, and earning backlinks to informative content is at the heart of a digital PR strategy for sustainability.



A hand is shown holding a pink glove. In the background, a yellow glove and a brown hand are visible. The scene is set against a bright blue background.

Thank

you

Sustainability is just one of the topics we deliver for our clients.

Want to explore how Bottle and Digital PR can grow the fame, and the findability, for your brand?

***Get in touch:
hello@wearebottle.com***

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