

**CAN SUSTAINABILITY WIN
THE WAR OF WORDS?**

“SAVING OUR PLANET IS NOW A COMMUNICATIONS CHALLENGE”

David Attenborough, 2020

In 2020, renowned British naturalist and broadcaster Sir David Attenborough said: “Saving our planet is now a communications challenge”. Five years later, the evidence suggests we have failed to meet that challenge. With populist politicians in power, and sustainability commitments being rolled back, Bloomberg epitomised 2025’s prevailing sentiment in its headline: “Trump will bury ESG, but it was already dead.”²

So how did we get here, and why is the language we’ve relied on failing? We believe language, framing and storytelling are at the heart of the problem. Our analysis for this paper reveals that resistance and lack of engagement with sustainability is often driven not by the underlying concepts – most people still agree with the importance of climate action and equality – but by their linguistic framing.

Technical lexicons mired in acronyms and jargon (‘Net Zero’) spread from the confines of scientific and sustainability conferences – inadvertently becoming adopted as the expression of the goal for the broader public. Investor speak like ‘ESG’ escaped the boardroom. These technocratic terms have struggled to engage the broader public conversation: many people are unable to even define what they mean.

Meanwhile, in a cost-of-living crisis and global economic slowdown, communications failed to make the connection between planetary and social goals and the things people are losing sleep over – money in their pocket, the cost of energy bills, keeping their homes warm, and jobs for their families. Doom-mongering and puritanism have turned off the general public.

Progressive environmental and social causes have also had their words targeted and weaponised with ruthless efficiency. Our analysis shows that the phrase ‘net zero’ in social media is now most strongly associated with the word ‘scam’ across all platforms. Misinformation and disinformation on key environmental and social topics is rife and increasingly automated.

Language shapes understanding: when the vocabulary of sustainability becomes contested, so too does its legitimacy. When language fails, then corporate reporting stagnates, brilliant strategies sit in folders, communication campaigns fail to connect, and leaders struggle to bring their employees with them toward their goals. But the challenge is not insurmountable. If reframed, language can still be used as a powerful tool for unity and progress.

Salterbaxter works with business leaders to help unlock value from sustainability, across strategy, reporting and governance, communications and engagement, and leadership and learning. Many of our clients have built sustainability into the heart of their business strategy. Their commitments to people and planet are embedded in their core values and central to the future resilience and growth of their businesses. Despite political headwinds, they remain focused on delivering progress towards their goals.

This report provides insights to help navigate the communications challenge – and therefore the climate and social challenges we face – with a new armoury: a powerful mix of engaging language, visionary storytelling and effective framing that focuses on shared values and shared benefits. We’ve explored the semiotics of three key dimensions of sustainability: environmental language, social terminology, and broader sustainability narratives – identifying both the expressions that create barriers and those that build bridges.

We capture the conclusions from in-depth conversation analysis across millions of social media posts to explore which terms resonate, and which have become casualties in the linguistic battleground. We draw on a broad range of recent third-party research on the topic and insights from a diverse panel event hosted by Salterbaxter incorporating views from the worlds of activism, journalism and academia.

Our objective is to provide a blueprint for a new approach to the public conversation. The right words, deployed with clarity and conviction, can still align with what people and businesses truly value. Our findings reveal a critical opportunity: by refreshing our vocabulary and how we tell stories, we can reframe sustainability not as a distant moral obligation, but as the key to unlocking real value for everyone in our complex and chaotic world.



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Chapter one

THE ENVIRONMENTAL LANGUAGE SHIFT



Language around environmental topics has seen the deepest disconnect between the words being used and the real-life values people hold dear. This chapter zones in on 'net zero' as the poster child for problematic terminology, as well as exploring words which may offer more compelling or relatable alternatives.

Net zero: from saviour to scam

'Net zero' emerged as a cornerstone concept after the IPCC published its seminal report on Global Warming of 1.5°C in 2018. The report stated, "Reaching and sustaining net zero global anthropogenic [human-caused] CO₂ emissions and declining net non-CO₂ radiative forcing would halt anthropogenic global warming on multi-decadal timescales (high confidence)"³. While this technical lexical field has served the scientific community, the term's complexity has rendered it problematic for broader audiences to understand. Research by Hubbub indicates most people struggle to define net zero, despite hearing it constantly⁴.

"THE MESSAGES AND STORIES WE PUT OUT NEED TO HAVE COHERENCE AND AUTHENTICITY. THAT'S WHY PHRASES LIKE NET ZERO OFTEN FAIL – THEY COME FROM A POLICY LENS AND ARE EASILY ASSOCIATED WITH POLITICS. TO FUTURE-PROOF OUR LANGUAGE, WE MUST BE SMART ABOUT THE PHRASES WE USE. IF WE KEEP LIFTING THEM FROM POLICY, THEY WON'T WORK"

Lucy Siegle

Environmental
Broadcaster & Writer



Off the back of the term's popularity, numerous companies and countries set ambitious net zero goals. While this signalled a commitment to addressing the climate crisis, many lacked a clear idea of how they would get there. The resulting mix of widespread adoption, limited understanding, and overambitious promises has created a vulnerability that has been systematically exploited. Climate-sceptic media and politicians have effectively reframed net zero as a deceptive scheme that threatens economic prosperity, personal freedom, and consumer choice, all while supposedly failing to deliver meaningful environmental benefits. What began as an ambitious goal is now portrayed as an impossible fantasy or a harmful plot.

➤ Headlines from the Telegraph⁵, the Daily Mail⁶, and the BBC⁷

BRITAIN'S GOAL OF HITTING NET ZERO BY 2050 IS 'SINISTER' AND MAKING MILLIONS OF HOUSEHOLDS POORER, SAYS US ENERGY SECRETARY

NET ZERO TYRANNY ROBS DRIVERS AND HOMEOWNERS OF FREEDOM OF CHOICE

NET ZERO BY 2050 'IMPOSSIBLE' FOR UK, SAYS BADENOC

Chapter one: The Environmental Language Shift

This linguistic battle is evident in our headline analysis of major publications, with coverage ranging from at best neutral reporting of corporate commitments through to emotionally charged framing using words like “tyranny,” “sinister,” and “impossible”. Our social media analysis reveals “scam” as the most common term associated with ‘net zero’ across platforms, with thousands of posts characterising it as a mechanism for oppression and economic control.



“Net Zero is a scam. There is no emergency. Just a desire for politicians to impoverish you with green taxes then control you using carbon credits. Do NOT accept it”⁸



10 likes

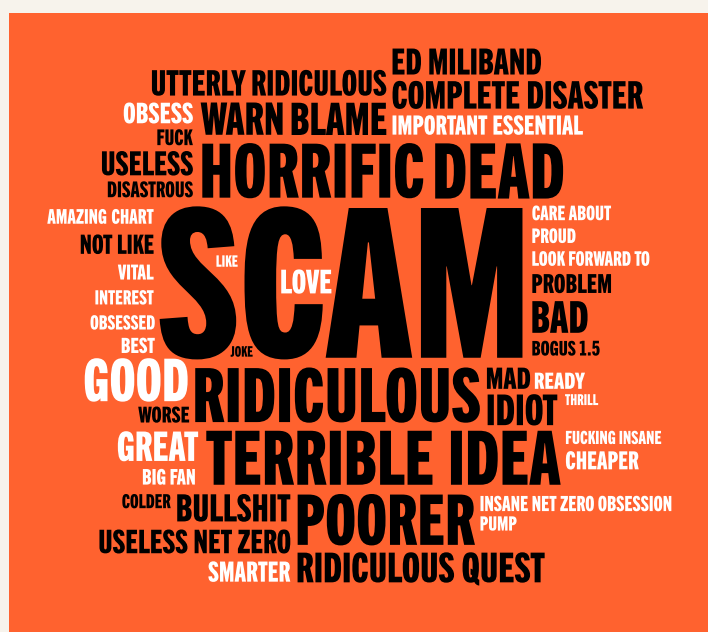


Post on X

**23,000 POSTS THIS MONTH
USED A CLOWN FACE EMOJI
WHEN SPEAKING OF NET ZERO**



Word cloud displaying the words that most often accompany ‘net zero’ on social media in the past 12 months⁸



This follows the trend of the term “carbon neutral” coming under fire for greenwashing, particularly due to the controversy surrounding carbon offsets. Companies making vague claims of carbon neutrality without genuinely reducing their emissions or using low-quality offsets can now be fined and accused of misleading consumers and regulators. Recent examples include lawsuits against Apple’s ‘carbon neutral’ watch⁹ and adidas’ claim to be carbon neutral by 2050 with no clear strategy in place¹⁰.

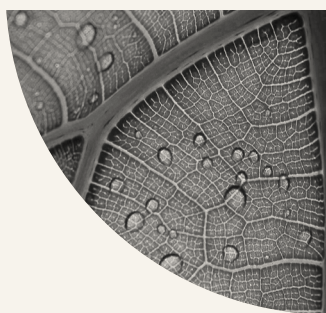
The resonant alternatives

Our research shows that while generic, abstract terms tend to alienate and confuse, being specific about tangible activities that help the environment resonates positively across audiences. Climate as broad concept can be difficult to “sell” – the impacts of emissions are difficult to visualise and attribute. Specific terms that resonate more positively include:

- * **NATURE**
- * **REGENERATIVE AGRICULTURE**
- * **CIRCULAR ECONOMY**
- * **ENERGY EFFICIENCY**

*NATURE

Nature is inherently evocative, and stories of habitat destruction, plastic waste in oceans, and spaces devoid of greenery have more aesthetic resonance. The key is connecting these specific actions back to fundamental values and basic human physical – and emotional – needs, which transcend political divides.



66



*REGENERATIVE AGRICULTURE

The term 'regenerative agriculture' also has cross-political appeal. The expression does what it says on the tin; growing things in a way where they can be grown over and over again. It's additive rather than subtractive, focusing on what there is to gain, not what there is to lose. It appeals to people's desire for healthy and 'natural' food (and their belief that organic food is inherently healthier¹¹), their desire to support local communities and trust in farmers¹² and brings about imagery of abundance.

However, while the term is positively received on social media, it's important to note that those who are speaking about regenerative agriculture are those who are aware of it. The term has potential, but has not reached critical mass, as studies show most consumers are unaware of what it is¹³. To achieve widespread adoption, more is needed to help outline its benefits and appeal to what people value the most – particularly long-term affordability, taste and nutritional value).



"President Trump's commitment to real food and regenerative agriculture shows his understanding of food as national security"⁸

10 likes



Post on X



Word cloud displaying the words that most often accompany "Regenerative agriculture" on social media in the past 12 months, and sentiment wheel displaying predominately positive sentiment⁸.

*CIRCULAR ECONOMY

While still an emerging term in public discourse, “circular economy” has avoided the politicisation plaguing other sustainability concepts. Its framing inherently connects environmental benefits with economic value, a linguistic structure that resonates across divides.

Google Trends data shows “circular economy” gaining steady global traction since 2016, with search interest remarkably distributed around the world, with Europe, China, and South America being the most interested in the term.

The concept of the circular economy has been largely shaped and stewarded by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation (EMF), which has played a key role in preserving its integrity¹⁴. While the Foundation didn’t invent the concept, it has successfully rebranded and repackaged it in a way that is business-friendly, measurable, scalable, and accessible to consumers increasingly concerned about waste.

Social media sentiment analysis shows “circular economy” predominantly associated with innovation, practical solutions, and forward-thinking businesses.

THE THREE MOST COMMON EMOJIS ACCOMPANYING THE TERM ARE THE RECYCLING SYMBOL, EARTH, AND ROCKET — VISUALLY REPRESENTING SUSTAINABILITY, PLANETARY CONCERN, AND PROGRESS.⁸



*ENERGY EFFICIENCY

“Energy efficiency” works effectively because it speaks to immediate personal advantages rather than distant environmental gains. Market research consistently shows that homeowners respond more positively to messaging about reduced utility bills than carbon reduction. KPMG’s 2024 consumer study¹⁶ found that 53% of UK adults cite lower energy costs as the primary benefit of low-carbon home improvements, compared to 44% who prioritise climate change mitigation.

This language preference extends to specific technologies:

- Heat pumps and solar panels face adoption challenges, partly due to their names. The terms highlight what the UK famously lacks—“heat” and “sun”, creating immediate psychological barriers despite their proven effectiveness¹⁶.
- Electric vehicles have gained traction by emphasising benefits directly relevant to consumers: lower fuel costs, reduced maintenance requirements, quieter operation, home charging convenience, and exemption from congestion charges like London’s ULEZ. Environmental benefits, while acknowledged as a motivator, typically aren’t the primary selling points¹⁷.
- Smart thermostats and energy-efficient appliances succeed by promoting convenience and cost savings first, with sustainability benefits positioned as an added bonus¹⁸.

The language around energy efficiency works because it connects to immediate household concerns -particularly financial security- while delivering environmental benefits almost as a byproduct.

Conclusion

Our analysis reveals a clear pattern in effective environmental language. It’s most effective when it taps into human values like health, security and prosperity, rather than abstract planetary goals. It’s clear, emotionally resonant and framed around solutions and gains, not guilt and sacrifice. To rebuild trust and engagement we need words that invite people in, not shut them out.

“WHO DELIVERS THE MESSAGE MATTERS — BUT EVEN MORE IMPORTANT IS HOW WE HELP PEOPLE FEEL IT. WE NEED A KIND OF EMOTIONAL RESONANCE WITH THE ISSUE TO DRIVE CHANGE.”

Lucy Siegle
Environmental
Broadcaster & Writer



EVOLVING SOCIAL SEMANTICS



DE&I (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) is perhaps the most obvious example of an acronym that has become weaponised. With over 31 million mentions over the past year on X alone⁸, it dwarves other sustainability terms in sheer volume, but that isn't a victory – it's a warning sign. The explosion of mentions reveals a more sinister trend. This chapter analyses this trend and whether spelled-out alternatives align more closely to peoples' true values.

The term “DE&I” or “DEI” has become radioactive in public discourse. Our analysis⁸ found that globally:

- Top emojis used alongside it are telling: 🇺🇸 (warning), 🔥 (inflammatory), and 🇺🇸 (politically charged)
- It's consistently surrounded by aggressive language: "dead," "blame," "dumb"
- The Trump administration has made dismantling DEI programmes a central policy objective
- Influential voices like Elon Musk actively fan these flames, with his post on X claiming "DEI means people DIE" generating over 141,000 likes despite having no basis in reality

The term has been so thoroughly poisoned that even mentioning it can immediately derail otherwise productive conversations. Whilst this trend is mainly being driven by the US, the below showcases the conversations around DE&I happening globally over the past year, excluding any mentions emanating from the US. Whilst slightly more positive, the overall sentiment is overwhelmingly negative, and the words being used to speak about it are extreme.



- Word cloud displaying the words that most often accompany "DEI" on social media over the past 12 months, globally but excluding the US, and accompanying sentiment wheel displaying predominately negative sentiment⁹.

Our research suggests the backlash against DE&I is driven not by opposition to diversity itself, but by concerns that these initiatives undermine meritocracy. Critics often see these programmes as prioritising demographics over qualifications, creating a sense of resentment. Ironically, some DE&I policies have been positioned as the source of – and not the solution to – discrimination in the workplace.

Compounding the issue, some poorly executed initiatives are perceived as tokenistic or performative, further fuelling distrust and scepticism, creating a perfect storm of distrust around terminology that might otherwise describe widely shared values.

- 78% of Americans want companies to reflect the diversity of the US. population²⁰
- Yet about half consider “DEI” itself a divisive term²⁰
- In the UK, similar patterns emerge, with everything from NHS funding challenges to university admissions being baselessly attributed to “DEI initiatives”⁸

WHAT TO DO IF YOU EXPERIENCE DISCRIMINATION RELATED TO DEI AT WORK



Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits employment discrimination based on protected characteristics such as race and sex. Different treatment based on race, sex, or another protected characteristic can be unlawful discrimination, no matter which employees are harmed. Title VII’s protections apply equally to all racial, ethnic, and national origin groups, as well as both sexes.

Before you can sue in federal court, you first must file a charge of discrimination with the EEOC. The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) investigates charges of discrimination and can file a lawsuit under Title VII against businesses and other private sector employers. The Department of Justice can file a lawsuit under Title VII against state and local government employers based on an EEOC charge, following an EEOC investigation.

What can DEI-related discrimination look like?

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) is a broad term that is not defined in the statute. Under Title VII, DEI policies, programs, or practices may be unlawful if they involve an employer or other covered entity taking an employment action motivated—in whole or in part—by an employee’s race, sex, or another protected characteristic. In addition to unlawfully using quotas or otherwise “balancing” a workforce by race, sex, or other protected traits, DEI-related discrimination in your workplace might include the following:

- US Equal Opportunity Commission, DEI at work: Discrimination related to, March 2025²³

Whilst many brands are rolling back on their DE&I initiatives, especially in the United States, many are simply rebranding. This indicates that people, and organisations, may not be rejecting the inherent concept of diversity but rather how it has been packaged and presented. The following looks at how four different banks in the US have renamed their DE&I divisions:

	Before	Now
Bank of America ²⁴	“Diversity and inclusion” group	“Opportunity and inclusion” group
Citigroup ²⁵	“Diversity, Equity and Inclusion and Talent Management”	“Talent Management and Engagement”
JP Morgan ²⁶	“Diversity, equity & inclusion”	“Diversity, opportunity & inclusion”
BNY ^{27, 28}	“Diversity, equity & inclusion”	“Belonging and inclusion”

The rebrand is telling; removing the complex word ‘equity’ from the mix, for softer language like ‘belonging’ and ‘opportunity’, brings us back to the idea of additive vs subtractive language. Equity has been met with opposition because it implies structural change, a redistribution of resources, and asking uncomfortable questions about power dynamics. Opportunity and belonging are palatable alternatives that avoid questioning a status quo.

DE&I best practice studies and reports focus on specific initiatives and language that promotes universally appreciated values with no exclusionary implications. The research suggests moving toward language that emphasises:

Specific initiatives rather than abstract concepts^{29, 30}

- Equal parental leave policies
- Neurodiversity programmes
- Fair hiring practices

Universally appreciated values^{29, 30}

- Belonging
- Fairness
- Merit-based opportunity (though how we define the word ‘merit’ is a contentious topic in and of itself)
- Talent development

It’s clear that creating fair, diverse workforces remains broadly supported, but the terminology has become a barrier rather than a bridge. To move beyond the political polarisation surrounding DE&I, companies should focus on specific, tangible initiatives that promote universally valued concepts like fairness, opportunity, and merit-based progress. By using language that emphasises these values and demonstrates the positive impact of their initiatives, organisations can help bridge the divide and re-engage with a wider audience.

“WE NEED TO MAKE CLEAR THIS AIM, THAT OUR VERSION OF THE WORLD IS BETTER. IT’S A MORE FUN PLACE TO LIVE, IT’S MORE EQUITABLE. EVERYBODY GETS ON. YOU HAVE BETTER QUALITY OF LIFE.”

Chris Hines
Co-Founder & Director,
Surfers Against Sewage



Chapter three

THE CORPORATE SUSTAINABILITY NARRATIVE: FROM GOOD INTENTIONS TO BUSINESS RESILIENCE

Corporate sustainability is facing a dual communications challenge – one rooted in perception, the other in language.

“THE TERM ‘SUSTAINABILITY’ HAS BECOME A FLOATING SIGNIFIER- IT FLOATS BETWEEN DIFFERENT GROUPS OF PEOPLE AND IS APPROPRIATED FOR DIFFERENT REASONS AND AGENDAS. THE TERM ‘NET ZERO’ HAS BECOME ASSOCIATED WITH INCREASING IDEOLOGICAL POLARISATION IN SOCIETY, USED IN DIFFERENT CONTEXTS AND FRAMED IN VARIOUS, SOMETIMES CONTRADICTIONARY WAYS.”

Dr. Beth Mallory
Lecturer in English
Linguistics, UCL



When words outpace action

Over the past two decades, corporate and brand sustainability messaging has leaned heavily on lofty, feel-good phrases: **“A force for good”**. **“There is no planet B.”** **“Better business for a better world.”** While these messages may have been well-intentioned, they were often unmoored from measurable action or operational integration. Fast Company³¹ has called this overused vocabulary a “toxic wordle” – a cloud of vague terminology that signals ambition but delivers little assurance. For regulators and an increasingly savvy public, these words now trigger scrutiny rather than trust.

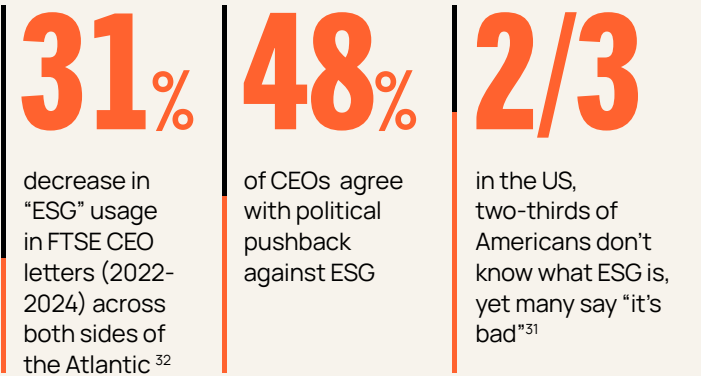
“IT’S THE QUANDARY OF SUSTAINABILITY. I THINK WHEN I SPEAK TO ANYONE THERE’S ALMOST A FATIGUE WITH THE WORD. IT’S BEEN USED SO MUCH IT ALMOST DOESN’T MEAN ANYTHING AT THIS POINT”

Jamila Brown
Activist & Founder
of JB Impact



Alongside this, the term ESG – which should be a unifying label for environmental, social and governance progress, is yet another term that has fallen victim to politicisation, has been overused and has become a barrier to public understanding. In the US, conservative politicians have used the acronym as a symbol of “woke capitalism”³³. Across the UK and EU, some businesses are quietly removing it from public-facing materials, even as continue ESG-related work internally.

Recent data underscores this pivot:



Headlines from Financial Times³⁴, Bloomberg³⁵, and Reuters³⁶.

WHY ESG FACES BACKLASH AND ITS FUTURE UNDER TRUMP 2.0

THE REAL IMPACT OF THE ESG BACKLASH

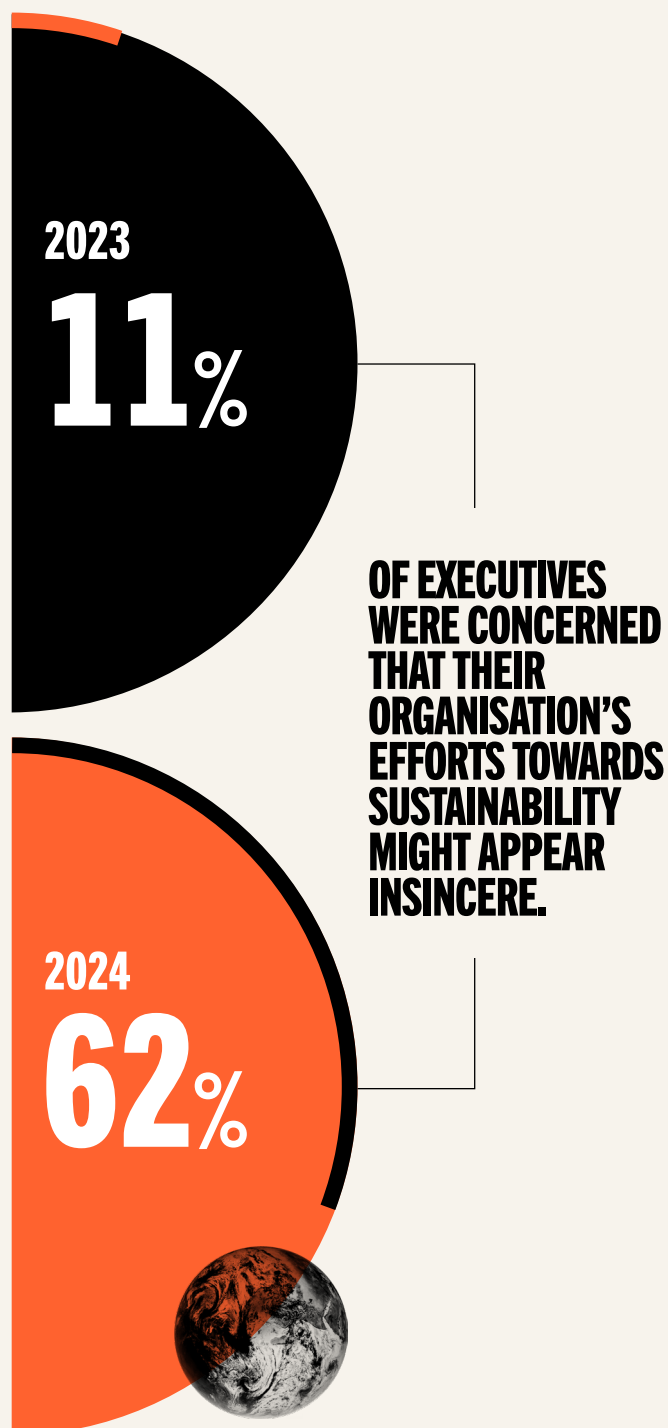
BLACKROCK’S FINK SAYS HE’S STOPPED USING ‘WEAPONISED’ TERM ESG



The rise of greenhushing

Caught between these dual challenges, and as global greenwashing regulations intensify, these tensions have given rise to a new phenomenon: 'greenhushing'. The term is used to describe when companies deliberately under-communicate their environmental initiatives to avoid scrutiny.

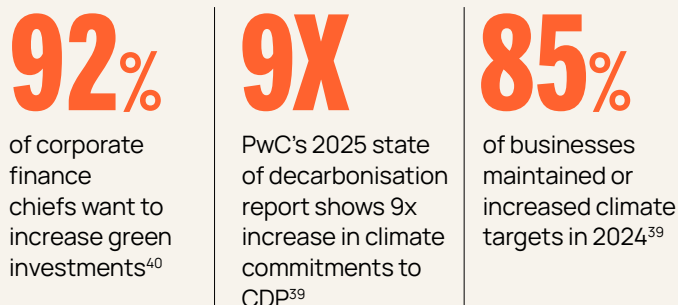
In 2023, only 11% of executives were concerned that their organisation's efforts towards sustainability might appear insincere. By 2024, that number surged to 62%³⁷. With scrutiny and risk of fines increasing, companies prefer to say nothing at all than to say the wrong thing. But silence has its consequences. It sidelines the role of communications in shaping public understanding, inspiring behavioural change and accelerating real action⁴¹



Entering an era of quiet progress?

To many, the growing silence signals retreat. News coverage points to corporate pullbacks— from climate pledges and DEI programmes to plastic reduction goals. Bloomberg³⁸, reports that firms are talking about the environment 76% less than they were three years ago. But on closer inspection, a more nuanced picture emerges.

First, many businesses aren't abandoning sustainability, in fact they're either maintaining their sustainability efforts or even ramping them up³⁹.



Second, the language is evolving, from abstract ideals to operational relevance. In our analysis of CEO statements, we found a 23% decrease in abstract terminology and a 58% increase in specific, measurable language in CEO annual statements between 2022 and 2025³². This evolution suggests businesses are recognising that effective sustainability communication across the board requires both precision and accessibility.

And more than that, the framing of sustainability is shifting. It's being repositioned not as a moral imperative, but as a strategic lever, part of business resilience and business fundamentals. For example, words like "resilience," "adaptability," and "competitive advantage" now commonly appear alongside sustainability commitments³².

We found a:



So that leads us to consider a more positive outlook, that what we're seeing is not the end of sustainability, but rather the end of how we used to talk about it.

As Günther Thallinger, a board member for the insurance group Allianz laid out: "[This is about an] understanding that this is not about saving the planet. This is about saving the conditions under which markets, finance, and civilization itself can continue to operate."⁴²

We're seeing businesses move from a narrative that was principles-led to performance-led, from abstract commitments to concrete value-creating actions and targets, from climate risk management to operational resilience. As the rest of this paper shows, we're not at all there yet, but there are some green shoots.

Conclusion

WINNING THE WAR OF WORDS



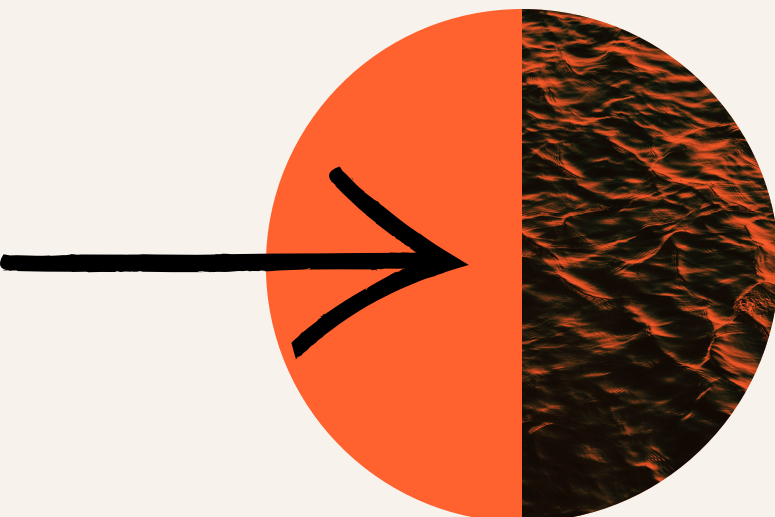
“DEI HAS BEEN WEAPONISED AND SO HAS NET ZERO - BUT AT THE END OF THE DAY WE ALL WANT THE SAME THING. EVERYBODY WANTS TO BREATHE CLEAN AIR. WE WANT TO BE ABLE TO JUMP IN AN UNPOLLUTED RIVER IN SUMMER AND SWIM, THAT LOOKS AMAZING. BUT THE LANGUAGE TO GET THERE IS THE PROBLEM. HOW DO WE EXPLAIN TO PEOPLE WHAT A GOOD, CLEAN FUTURE LOOKS LIKE?”

Jamila Brown
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“IT SEEMS LIKE WE’RE ALL OVER THE WORD ‘SUSTAINABILITY’—BUT THERE’S A WHOLE AUDIENCE THAT’S NEVER EVEN REALLY HEARD IT. THIS IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO LEAPFROG THE FATIGUE AND START FRESH WITH A NEW TERM THAT REACHES A WIDER GROUP.”

Lucy Siegle
Environmental Broadcaster
& Writer



At Salterbaxter, we believe that reframing the sustainability narrative is a strategic imperative. And it's one that can drive real business value. To help clients meet this challenge, we work across the full spectrum of strategy, reporting, and communications to build narratives that resonate with investors, employees, regulators, and the wider public. What we've learned is that winning the war of words requires pulling three powerful levers:

01 FROM ABSTRACT TO CONCRETE

Too often, sustainability messaging gets stuck in abstraction, cloaked in jargon and acronyms and ideals that feel disconnected from reality. To move forward, we must:

- Avoid acronyms that alienate rather than engage
- Use language that's harder to weaponise - grounded in specifics, not ideology
- Illustrate with tangible examples, rooted in business operations and outcomes
- Prioritise measurable outcomes over vague ambition
- Translate for your audience: focus on outcomes, not initiatives

> SPECIFICITY WITHOUT JARGON

The most resilient terms are specific enough to avoid misinterpretation while remaining accessible. For example, "forever chemicals" has immediate resonance and clarity where "PFAS (Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances)" doesn't.

02 THE RHETORIC OF RESILIENCE

Rather than positioning sustainability as a constraint, we must reframe it as a catalyst for value creation, business continuity and long-term advantage. That means:

- Shifting the story from "doing less harm" to "building more value"
- Speaking in the language of business: growth, competitiveness, resilience, security, jobs
- Embedding sustainability not as a moral obligation, but as core to future-proofing operations

> ADDITIVE FRAMING

Words like "regenerative" outperform "reduction" in public discourse. People respond better to what they stand to gain than what they're told to give up.

03 CONNECT TO WHAT TRULY MATTERS

Facts alone won't win hearts. People respond to what they understand, and what they feel. To earn attention and trust, communications must:

- Speak to real-world needs, not abstract frameworks
- Show how sustainability improves lives and solves everyday problems
- Focus on progress and solutions, not just challenges
- Terminology that connects to primary human needs and desires- security, prosperity, health, beauty, community - transcends political divisions.

> SPEAKING TO REAL WORLD NEEDS

The rise of "Net Zero Dads" - tech-savvy consumers championing green home tech - shows how sustainability ideals can tap into values like optimisation, security, and creativity. This expands the audience beyond traditional environmental advocates.

“RESEARCH HAS SHOWN US THAT WORDS LIKE “CLIMATE CHANGE” OR “GLOBAL WARMING” NO LONGER MOVE PEOPLE. THEY’RE OVERUSED, EMOTIONALLY FLAT. THIS CREATES TWO DANGERS. DESENSITISATION, AS WE FEEL THERE IS NOTHING WE CAN DO EXCEPT IGNORE IT. OR THE OTHER SIDE WHERE THINGS WE DO BECOME STIGMATISED, AS IS CURRENTLY THE CASE WITH NET ZERO.”

Dr. Beth Mallory
Lecturer in English
Linguistics, UCL

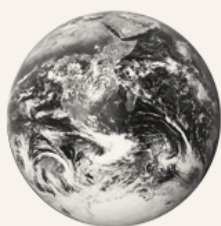


Ultimately, this is more than a linguistic exercise, it's a mindset shift. It calls for a rethink of how sustainability is positioned, and understood, by boards, by markets and by the public. It recognises that sustainability can no longer live in a parallel track — it must be embedded in the business model, investment thesis, and value proposition.

In this new phase, sustainability isn't about “doing less harm.” It's about building more value. The story is no longer one of compliance and corporate responsibility – It's about competitiveness, innovation, and long-term viability.

The public still supports climate action — 61% of people back the UK's net zero goals⁴³, despite political noise and media fatigue. But public support is fragile, and how we communicate the how of sustainability has never been more important.

If we want to protect progress, win trust, and unlock new value, we must evolve the narrative. At Salterbaxter, we're here to help businesses do exactly that.



APPENDIX

Our methodology

We used a combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis to track the evolution of sustainability language. We've analysed over one million social media posts, examined mainstream media headlines across political spectrums, and conducted a comparative analysis of CEO communications in 40 annual reports from 20 companies (spanning both US and UK markets) between 2022 and 2024. We've undertaken a comprehensive review of third-party sources on the topic. We've included qualitative contributions from a panel discussion on this topic featuring diverse voices from media, activism, journalism and academia.

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