Strategic storytelling in the age of sustainability

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Abstract

Sustainability is high on the strategic agenda and is surely there to stay. While some companies are sustainable since inception, others are repositioning themselves in order to be associated with sustainability values. In both situations, communicating about sustainability is key, but requires delicate handling to avoid washing perceptions. Authenticity and emotions are therefore key dimensions of sustainability communication, which happen to match with strategic storytelling elements. Storytelling is discussed in this paper as a powerful mechanism to bring about desired change in individuals, communities, organizations, and society. Drawing from the literature on storytelling, we present, discuss, and illustrate a framework with four strategic elements for companies that want to be successful with sustainability storytelling, which we refer to as the 4 A's: starting with the "why" of the story (Aim), actively engaging stakeholders and associating with partners (Actors), using an aspirational context (Aspiration) and using the right media to bring your story to life (Action). We also emphasize that a holistic approach is key in doing sustainability storytelling the right way. We conclude with general recommendations that managers need to consider when endeavoring sustainability storytelling.

Keywords: storytelling, sustainability, brand strategy, communication, stakeholder engagement

The strategic importance of sustainability

The origins of sustainability in a corporate context can be traced back to philanthropism of business moguls such as Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, and Henry Ford in the early 20th century (Wulfson, 2001). Since the 1960s, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) became increasingly institutionalized in the Western world, but was mostly focused on minimizing or eliminating harmful effects of businesses on society and the environment (Mohr et al., 2001). As such, CSR obtained a place on the strategic agenda, as it was associated with a "license" or implicit permission to operate (Demuijnck & Fasterling, 2016). To this avail, businesses engaged in Public Relations through corporate communication. This involves trying to get coverage from third-party media on business-related news-worthy items, in order to nurture a favorable opinion within different types of stakeholder communities (e.g., investors, government, (prospective) employees and customers) (Dhanesh, 2017).

Borrowing from the forestry industry, where sustainability refers to the idea of not harvesting more than what the forest can provide, the United Nations (UN) Brundtland Commission defined sustainable development as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (United Nations, 1988). In response to the UN's call for action, businesses progressively started to take into account not just their financial performance, but also their impact on society and the environment. More specifically, in addition to reporting the *Profit* bottom line, companies increasingly measured, reduced, and reported *People* and *Planet* "bottom lines" (Paun, 2018; Wilburn & Wilburn, 2014). Collectively these three P's are referred to as *the triple bottom line* and this concept has since gained significant interest from businesses, governmental organizations, and academia (Larivière & Smit, 2022). Consistent with the claim of Porter and Kramer (2006) that CSR can be a source of competitive advantage, prior research has found that companies that do not just strive for Profit, but also focus on People and Planet impact, outperform peers, both financially and in terms of survival chances (Elkington, 1997).

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Nowadays, the terms CSR and corporate sustainability are sometimes used interchangeably. However, van Marrewijk (2003) makes an important distinction between them, in the sense that CSR refers to responsibility aspects of organizations involving reporting and transparency, while corporate sustainability focuses on the agency of organizations in terms of value creation "demonstrating the inclusion of social and environmental concerns in business operations and in interactions with stakeholders" (p. 102). The author further highlights that an advanced level of sustainability involves "a synergistic, win-together approach with all relevant stakeholders" (van Marrewijk, 2003, p. 102).

Sustainability has seen steadily increasing interest in the corporate world over the last few decades, but a seismic shift was caused by the establishment of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the UN in 2015. The SDGs cover a broad range of issues and are formulated in a generic way. While it may require some translation, all types of businesses can identify with these goals, as illustrated by research ranging from the tourism (Boluk et al., 2019) to the fishing industry (Tsolakis et al., 2021). The SDGs have also been adopted as a language that companies can use to communicate with different types of stakeholders. Indeed, customers, employees, regulators and other stakeholders are increasingly playing an active role (as co-creators) in sustainability practices of companies (Kemper & Ballantine, 2019; Leroi-Werelds & Matthes, 2022; Paun, 2018; van Riel et al., 2021), to the extent that they put pressure on companies to act (more) sustainably. As an example, when the Parental Rights in Education Act (known as the "Don't Say Gay" bill) was passed in Florida, Walt Disney Company leadership did not speak up publicly as it had always tried to stay out of politics, while providing the reasoning that their stories speak for their support of diversity. Employees were outraged about the lack of action and, in response, organized walk outs and launched a website with a list of demands of leadership.

The demand for sustainable practices and products has further risen in the last few years, as the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated the need to care for our environment and others, and to report doing so (Zharfpeykan & Ng, 2021). Reputation and image are indeed amongst the top 3 reasons for companies to "do good" (Lim & Pope, 2021). This trend is also reflected in consumer purchases: in 2021, 33% of European consumers were reported to stop purchasing some brands because of their

negative impact on the environment or society (GfK, 2021). Also, ethical concerns and ideological incompatibility are often causes for consumers or other stakeholders to hate, reject or boycott brands, resulting in severe reputational harm (Hegner et al., 2017; Dessart & Cova, 2021).

Communicating about sustainability

Given its strategic importance, companies have started to incorporate sustainability in their (marketing) strategies (de Ruyter et al., 2022; Larivière & Smit, 2022), which can be enacted through an offering-centric approach (creating and promoting more sustainable products or services), a focus on changing customer lifestyles and behaviors, or an approach that aims to transform society and change norms (Kemper & Ballantine, 2019). Whichever way it is enacted, there is a clear strategic impetus to communicate about sustainability in order to improve the related brand image and corporate reputation (Baldassarre & Campo, 2016; Leroi-Werelds & Matthes, 2022).

Some companies, like Tesla, Patagonia, Le Pain Quotidien, or Tony's Chocolonely, have sustainability at the core of their business and narrative since inception. These companies can be referred to as "born sustainable" (Todeschini et al., 2017) or "sustainability natives" (Rodriguez-Vila & Bharadwaj, 2017) and they continue to lead the way in terms of sustainability strategies. Other companies have been founded and developed without sustainability at the core, but are now seeking to align with such values; they can be referred to as "sustainability immigrants" (Rodriguez-Vila & Bharadwaj, 2017). Finally, there are companies that are considered to be "anti-sustainable" by nature, such as oil or traditional fast food companies.

For any type of company, communicating about sustainability is a delicate task. In particular, when communicating too much about sustainability or inadequately doing so, companies can be accused of greenwashing (or purpose/woke/rainbow-washing) (Leroi-Werelds & Matthes, 2022; Reilly & Hynan, 2014). Indeed, greenwashing accusations can even be an issue for "sustainability natives", such as juice brand Innocent, now owned by Coca-Cola, that saw its latest ad banned in the UK, on account of being misleading. The advert promoted Innocent as a sustainable company, but this claim was considered inappropriate with regard to their usage of plastic bottles (see Appendix 1).

Prior research highlights that successful communication about sustainability establishes authenticity and credibility (Alhouti et al., 2016; Larivière & Smit, 2022), which can be obtained by clearly outlining the company's genuine motivations, transparent reporting of goal attainment, and providing tangible evidence and proof of real sustainability impact (Leroi-Werelds & Matthes, 2022). Credibility can be further substantiated by providing testimonials, labels, or certificates from independent bodies that perform an audit based on standards (Zhang et al., 2014). In addition to such functional characteristics, effective sustainability communication needs to move people emotionally (Leroi-Werelds & Matthes, 2022; Matthes et al., 2014). To obtain an emotional affect, communication media that offer multisensory experiences are most effective (Yoganathan et al., 2019), including virtual reality technology (Laukkanen et al., 2022).

In summary, practitioners and scholars alike recognize the importance of moving beyond void sustainability marketing communication and following a strategic direction that effectively embeds a real and trustworthy willingness to "do the right thing" (Dowel & Jackson, 2020; Leroi-Werelds & Matthes, 2022). This strategic goal, in which emotions play an important role, can be achieved by integrating sustainability in storytelling (Cowan & Guzman, 2020; Spears & Roper, 2013).

Strategic Storytelling

Storytelling is increasingly recognized as a tool for strategic change (James & Minnis, 2004; Spear & Roper, 2013), including for fostering a company's sustainable reputation and image. Storytelling is a strategic branding practice by which companies apply narrative structures over branded content. Thanks to its unique structure, storytelling's power has been widely evidenced, as it allows engaging audiences cognitively, emotionally and behaviorally (Dessart & Pitardi, 2019), and provides meaning to brands (Mills & Robson, 2019). A story structure is typically composed of three key elements: the moral gist, the characters, and the plot.

First, the moral gist of stories is paramount in strategic storytelling: this "lesson learned" is what makes the story most powerful (Pera & Viglia, 2016) and this story element likely to generate the most word-of-mouth and response from the audience (Dessart & Pitardi, 2019). A strong lesson

learned, combined with authenticity (Lundqvist et al., 2013) and verisimilitude (how believable and real-life the story is) are instrumental strategic storytelling elements (van Laer et al., 2014), because they allow the story to be trusted. The moral gist needs to be clearly tied with business objectives to convey a strong message and hold strategic potential.

The second element refers to the characters of the story, with whom the audience is able to identify and empathize (Pera & Viglia, 2016). In strategic storytelling, it is important to allow stakeholders to strongly identify with the characters, because this identification process is most likely to sustain positive attitudes toward change and lead to real action. When we empathize with characters, we want to be and act like them. Typically, a clear hero to root for, and a problem or villain that they are confronted with, are key to stimulate engagement. One way to facilitate identification and empathy even more directly, is thus to involve stakeholders in storytelling by making them feel like the protagonists, or allowing them to be (co-)creators of the story. Such involvement has the potential to improve the impact of storytelling on brands, consumers and society (Dessart & Pitardi, 2019; Hollebeek et al., 2020), in terms of adherence to the story, believability, and trust (Dhanesh, 2017) leading to favorable outcomes for brand awareness, attachment and advocacy (de Regt et al, 2021).

Unfortunately, stakeholder involvement in storytelling is usually seen as a *top-down* communication practice aimed at increasing trust and credibility of the message proposed by the brand (O'Riordan & Fairbrass, 2014). Stakeholders are not usually actively involved in storytelling, rather, they are seen as passive recipients of communication messages by the brand (Baldassare & Campo, 2016). However, *bottom-up* instances of stakeholder involvement in storytelling have also been recognized, where stakeholder's opinion, needs and preferences are taken into account in creating a message. One type of such involvement is purely based on stakeholder initiative without any firm-based incentive or support, as stakeholders create a narrative through reviews and feedback, for which social media are often used (Gorry & Westbrook, 2011; van Laer et al., 2019). In another bottom-up type of stakeholder involvement, stakeholders actively help to create the message based on a brand initiative, such as providing a story cue (Kamleitner et al., 2019), the outcome of which has been referred to as 'story-doing' (de Regt et al., 2021).

The third key element of a story structure taps into the context of the story, its setup and unfolding. It is a crucial element to immerse the audience. A context which is very life-like will increase the realistic aspect of the story (van Laer et al., 2014), while a fictional setup will likely create strong transportation into the story universe (Escalas, 2004). In storytelling literature, this element is called the plot. Using causality and chronology, the plot provides a logical structure and meaning to the story (Green & Brock, 2002). Further, when a strong cause-effect relationship appears in a story, because of the plot unfolding, stakeholders are able to identify clearly how their (or others') actions contribute to the story, fostering evolution or revolution.

Last, choosing the right media in line with the objective and audience to reach is key, as a variety of media can be used to convey a story. Evolving from traditional forms of storytelling like oral tales or books, narratives are now transmitted in a variety of ways, each with their own specific characteristics. Social media are often used nowadays to foster positive affect and attitudes through storytelling (Huang et al., 2018) and consumer reviews written in a narrative way are also often recognized as strongly impacting other consumers' decision-making (van Laer et al., 2019). Video-based storytelling is also commonly used, and it has been found to provide an immersive experience that generates strong emotions and deep transportation into the story context (Dessart, 2018; Pera and Viglia, 2016). More recently, research recognizes that using advanced technologies like virtual reality for storytelling may engender even further immersion and stronger experiences for audiences (Cummings et al., 2022; De Regt et al., 2021).

In conclusion, while storytelling holds strong potential for strategic change and improved stakeholder engagement through its unique elements, prior research does not provide guidance on how strategic storytelling can be employed for sustainability values.

Four strategic story elements for successful sustainability storytelling

Considering the hitherto separate literature streams on sustainability communication and storytelling, it becomes clear that both have overlapping focus points. Indeed, best practices for both involve authenticity, emotions, the use of co-creation, and multi-sensory experiences. In this section, we draw upon both streams, as well as upon a synthesis of real-life business cases, to develop a framework with four strategic elements for a holistic approach towards impactful sustainability storytelling (see Figure 1). These elements, stemming directly from the storytelling literature discussed above, are explained and illustrated in the subsections that follow. What we propose is not just a set of distinct elements, as it is important to consider them in an interconnected manner to maximize effectiveness (Leroi-Werelds & Matthes, 2022). While managers are free to start from any of the elements, our experience indicates that following the 4 steps, as they are outlined in Figure 1, is most productive.
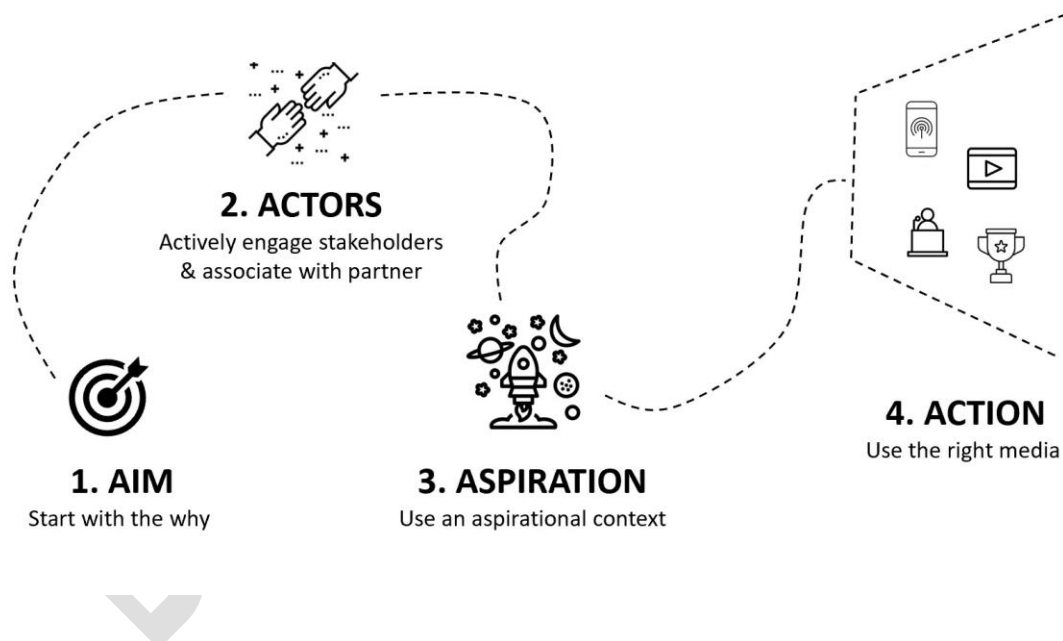

Figure 1: Strategic story elements for sustainability storytelling

1. Start with the "why" of the story (Aim)

As coined by Simon Sinek (2011), the "why", or purpose, of a business is key in inspiring stakeholders and creates a reason to believe. We distinguish three strategic purposes for which companies can engage in sustainability storytelling: highlighting existing sustainability values, repositioning towards sustainability values, and transforming ecosystems or society with sustainability values at the core. The strategic purpose pursued should drive the story plot and therefore create a strong lesson learned or moral gist (Pera and Viglia, 2016).

Highlighting existing sustainability values: this concerns mainly companies that are sustainable at heart. Leveraging sustainability storytelling from the very start, using it as a unique selling proposition, is increasingly common. Dove[1] provides a case in point, as it has focused on inclusion and diversity as core brand values since many years (Dessart & Pitardi, 2019). In their long history of storytelling, body positivity is advocated and customers are empowered, through relatable ad characters and 'real' people (i.e. not models), with a variety of age, ethnicity and body type. In one commercial (see Appendix 1), a sketch drawing is made based on a self-description and a description of a stranger that they meet. The stranger's description is much more positive, resulting in a more beautiful sketch. The focus on the lesson learned is really strong, which is that "Real Beauty" is about feeling good about how you look. Such brands can also use their own history of sustainability values over time as temporal sequence, showing their growth and impact on society over time.

Repositioning towards sustainability values: companies using this approach are usually not sustainable at heart, but want to proactively move towards more ethical values (Rodriguez-Vila & Bharadwaj, 2017). In particular, such companies typically make one or more aspects of their business model more sustainable (Kemper & Ballantine, 2019; Muncy & Iyer, 2021), for instance by changing their sourcing strategies, production processes, product characteristics or go-to-market approaches (e.g., distributor network). Companies repositioning toward sustainability should pay specific attention in their storytelling endeavors to recognize the position they come from and how they are

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[1] . Note that Dove is part of the large multinational Unilever that is not (yet) fully sustainable.

fundamentally shifting. They can also highlight their more sustainable offering in the plot. An example of a company motivated by repositioning values is the French oil and gas company TotalEnergies. Since its rebranding (used to be Total), the company has expanded toward sustainable sources of energy production, such as solar panels, storage, and distribution (i.e. EV charging stations) (Mallet & White, 2021). Moreover, TotalEnergies is expanding its offering from products to solutions. Their sustainability values also extend beyond environmental concerns: in early 2022, they ended their operations in Myanmar because of human rights abuses.

A specific situation of repositioning toward sustainability arises when companies reposition to recover from a crisis. This type of repositioning is the situation where the strongest washing concerns may arise, necessitating a particularly thoughtful storytelling approach. When sustainable claims are incongruent with the past experience of stakeholders with the brand, sustainable repositioning may actually hurt the brand and result in a stronger backlash (Leroi-Werelds & Matthes, 2022). In this situation, the brand first needs to acknowledge the crisis, show that they learned their lesson and genuinely want to act upon it and, last, express hope that consumers will trust them in their efforts. The company should go further than appeasing their stakeholders and using a well-crafted narrative like a Band-Aid. If the claims are serious, a real transformation needs to appear in the business practices (production, human resources, transportation, sourcing, data management etc.) and in their DNA, not just in marketing and communications. The public needs to have proof of these changes, which can only occur slowly, over the long term. A case in point is the rebranding of Facebook under a new name, Meta, in the wake of several accusations on poor data and human resources management. This rebranding has been met with strong skepticism from the public who still awaits for the social network to make real changes internally (Lee Yohn, 2021).

Transforming ecosystems or society with sustainability values at the core: the company is motivated to use storytelling as an instrument to support broader societal impact through changes in consumption behavior and the ecosystem it operates in (Hopwood et al., 2005). The storytelling plot therefore goes beyond the company and puts the spotlight on others in the ecosystem or society. Tony's Chocolonely is a Dutch chocolate manufacturing company actively fighting (child) slavery

surrounding chocolate production globally and is recognized as the most sustainable brand in the Netherlands.[2] Beyond producing sustainable chocolate themselves, they pledge to ban slavery practices in chocolate production globally. A particularly interesting approach to storytelling was Tony's Chocolonely's development of a 21 minute documentary (see Appendix 1), which features cocoa farmers and amplifies their voice by sharing their perspective on aspects such as fairness in the industry as well as their dreams and aspirations. In the whole documentary, Tony's Chocolonely is not mentioned once.

2. Actively engage stakeholders and associate with partners (Actors)

While engaging a multitude of stakeholders has been central to managerial and scholarly thinking on sustainability, this notion is still nascent when it comes to the marketing and branding literatures (Brodie et al., 2019), including in storytelling where stakeholder engagement has not been explored. Whereas the initial and principal focus in marketing has long been on engaging customers (e.g., Hollebeek, 2011), recent work recognizes that organizations need to engage a network of actors around their brands, including employees, suppliers, partners, government, citizens or society at large (O'Riordan & Fairbrass, 2014; van Riel et al., 2021). As stakeholder engagement is dependent upon stakeholders' willingness to invest their time and efforts (Brodie et al., 2019), their varying interests need to be understood and managed carefully (Hollebeek et al., 2020). Stakeholder engagement in sustainability storytelling thus involves the recognition and respect of other's inclinations (Dhanesh, 2017; Noland & Phillips, 2010), necessary to building trustful relationships and creating social capital for the common good (Maak, 2007). Prior research suggests that co-creating stories related to sustainability may positively impact consumer trust and loyalty (Iglesias et al., 2020).

Stakeholders can be characterized in terms of their internal or external nature. Figure 2 represents this notion on a continuum, as there is no clear-cut line between the extremes. A multitude of different stakeholders can be engaged in each storytelling initiative. No matter who is engaged, an important

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[2] See the Sustainable Brand Index, which is based on consumer perceptions (Sustainable Brand Index, 2022 https://www.sb-index.com/the-netherlands).

point to make sustainability storytelling more impactful is to move the passive audience to a role of active contributors, by becoming protagonists in so-called "story-doing" (de Regt et al., 2020). However, we also note that engaging stakeholders, especially external ones, in sustainability storytelling can backfire and lead to salient negative forms of engagement (expressing disagreement or criticism), which can harm the brand (Bowden et al., 2017).

STAKEHOLDER TYPE CONTINUUM

Figure 2: Stakeholder type continuum

Internal stakeholders: Employees are a critical group of internal stakeholders to engage in storytelling for various reasons: they represent the brand as frontline employees, are the first ambassadors of the brand externally and when they wish to rebel against a brand, they also have strong resources and information to attack the brand. For instance, disgruntled Starbucks employees formed online communities in which they anonymously bashed their (former) employer. Indeed, while the company often presents itself as a champion of inclusivity and acceptance, Starbucks employees have complained with stories relating to the poor consideration of their well-being at work. In addition to managing the wider brand reputation, engaging internal stakeholders is also key for employer branding, which relates to attracting and retaining talent (Biendenbach & Manzhynski, 2016).

Some companies are increasingly developing internal initiative to make employees contribute and actively help shape sustainability values and stories. For instance, Staples uses a proprietary intranet (called "The Hub") to engage their 70,000 associates in activities related to their core values (Reilly & Hynan, 2014). Morgan Stanley also regularly involves its employees around the world in real-life community activities aiming to support, amongst others, children's health, as part of their 60-year old "Giving back" program. The buildup of a playground from scratch, in a neighborhood of the Boston

area, with Morgan Stanley employees as volunteers, is an example of actions that embody the sustainability values of the company (Morgan Stanley, 2022). As they communicate about this, the employees become the protagonists in the story.

External stakeholders: The primary category of external stakeholders to actively engage in sustainability storytelling are customers. Some customers can be very close ambassadors of the firm, akin to internal stakeholders, but the wider mass of customers are rather external. Customer engagement can take many forms and support various objectives (Dessart & Pitardi, 2019) and it has been extensively researched in social media environments (Dessart et al., 2015). In these environments, sporadic and low-commitment engagement consists of comments, shares or likes. Emerging forms of more active customer engagement into brand storytelling include asking for their contribution before launching sustainability storytelling or collecting their comments a posteriori. Going even further, brands like Patagonia invite their customers to give back their worn outfits, through an initiative called "Wornwear" (Michel et al., 2019): before trading their gear, customers are invited to share their story of brand usage on the Wornwear platform. Customers become the heroes of their own stories, associating with the brand ethos and values and inspiring others to act the same. Collectively, these customer stories contribute to the wider brand narrative on sustainability.

Beyond employees or customers, companies can also engage business partners (e.g., suppliers, vendors, or strategic partners), governments and policy-makers, NGOs, and other members of society at large in their strategic storytelling. For instance, investors (who can be considered as both internal and external stakeholders) and governments can be involved creatively in storytelling. A case in point is provided by the Environmental Defenders Office of Queensland (EDO QLD), in Australia. The NGO has a history of raising money and awareness through fundraising campaigns. One of their campaigns features EDO QLD representatives expressing their concerns and needs for support to bring up climate change issues to the High Court of Australia. Through a convincing narrative expressing the issues at stake, with concrete examples, stories of local actors, and showcases of the work they are currently pursuing, EDO QLD mobilizes potential investors to get engaged in their fight. At the same time, the organization is sending strong messages to the local authorities and

governments, to revise their policies, support well-being in the area and stop actions destroying Queensland's' natural habitat. Thanks to a total of 13 campaigns on crowdfunding website Chuffed.org, EDO QLD has raised over 1,000,000 AUD.

Active stakeholder engagement enables moving the narrative away from the brand. Instead, stakeholders (e.g., customers, partners, suppliers or employees) are the heroes. Whether engagement is achieved through interactive technologies, community activities or by asking stakeholders' opinion online, active engagement will ramp up their sense of involvement, importance, and impact. In the next section, we further discuss engagement with strategic partners, a specific type of stakeholder who can increase the scope and impact of the narrative.

Associate with partners: To increase the perceived authenticity of storytelling, companies can associate with partners that have an established and undisputed reputation in terms of sustainability, whether it is a (non-profit) organization, celebrity, local or international activist. This way, the legitimacy of the brand to use sustainability storytelling is reinforced and risks of washing perceptions are reduced. Brands can also "team" up under the same sustainability efforts to expand their reach and impact, for instance on policy-making or to push innovation further (Wassmer et al., 2017).

The (RED) organization presents an example of such a well-established sustainability-oriented organization that many brands partner with (see Appendix 1). With the initial aim to fight AIDS, U2-singer Bono and activist Bobby Shriver created (RED) in 2006. Since then, (RED) has developed into a global network, including a large array of well-known brands, their customers and employees, and with a broad sustainability-oriented mission. By creating (RED)-labelled products and experiences, associated brands help raise money for the Global Fund, one of the largest funders for global health initiatives. The fund also now contributes to fighting the COVID-19 pandemic and other widespread diseases. (RED) has raised over 700 million US dollar to date thanks to collaborations with over 70 business partners.

An example of a specific brand that partnered with (RED) is Fiat. Fiat "relaunched" their mythical model 500 car, making it 100% electric (see Appendix 1). Fiat, along with car makers of the same

group, also committed to donating 4 billion US dollar to the (RED) cause by 2023. Several other sustainable features were added to the car, like seats made from recycled plastic. The broader range of Fiat models has also been redesigned to be more sustainable. As such, Fiat provides an example of a strong sustainability partnership, while also illustrating a brand repositioning toward sustainability values (see above). Yet, the involvement with Fiat in sustainable values goes beyond partnering with (RED). In 2020, they issued a branding video, narrated by Leonardo DiCaprio, showing their commitment to sustainability with a strong moral gist and urge to act (see Appendix 1). In this example, Fiat associated with a celebrity that is recognized in terms of climate-change activism, to reinforce the potential of the story to generate identification, a sense of urgency, and action. Indeed, acting like Leonardo DiCaprio is a bigger motivation than acting like a random advertisement character. Stellantis (the group owning Fiat) also states in their yearly sustainability report that they strongly involve their employees in community-support activities (see Appendix 1).

Another case in point is provided by the Formula E (FE) ecosystem (Standaert & Jarvenpaa, 2016), related to the first fully-electric racing series and the first carbon neutral sports since inception. The competition offers a platform for developing and showcasing electric vehicle technology, which is the reason many car manufacturers have joined the competition (in lieu of combustion engine-based competitions). The races are held in the city centers, to provide a tangible association with clean urban mobility. Beyond environmental concerns, FE supports access to education (UNICEF partnership) and promotes healthy living (within the framework of a United Nations program). In addition to car manufacturers, many B2B and B2C companies (e.g., ABB, Allianz, Enel, and Heineken) are eager to become associated with FE and co-create stories around sustainability, in which the drivers are often featured as protagonists. Moreover, fans also become active participants, as they can vote through digital mechanisms for their favorite driver. The drivers with the most votes then obtain additional electric power to be used during the race to defend their position or overtake a competitor. One of the competing teams that also manufactures electric vehicles for road use – Mahindra – provided an incentive for fans to vote for them, by promising to plant a tree for every vote.

3. Use an aspirational context (Aspiration)

Sustainability is a topic that is often not considered fun in itself. In terms of environmental sustainability for instance, the state of the world could be compared to the likes of a horror movie. To make the message more relatable and entertaining, sustainability storytelling can happen in a setting such as sports or entertainment. In sports, there are protagonist (the athletes) that represent a bold and strong archetype. The Union of European Football Associations (UEFA), for instance, made a documentary to support the fight against discrimination based on race, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, or refugee background. In this 53-minutes documentary called "Outraged" (see Appendix 1), personal stories of exclusion and discrimination are shared by well-known female and male soccer players (e.g., Megan Rapinoe and Paul Pogba), as well as coaches (e.g., José Mourinho) and referees. By using these role models that many fans aspire to, this campaign can have a bigger impact.

Another clear example of the power of an aspirational context relates to the "Fandom Forward" movement. This movement was established in 2005 as the "Harry Potter Alliance," connecting over 100,000 Harry Potter fans worldwide, but the community was renamed to "Fandom Forward" to be more inclusive of different types of fans. As their mission, the website states (see Appendix 1): "Fandom Forward turns fans into heroes. We use the power of story and popular culture to make activism accessible and sustainable." This fan community organizes campaigns and mobilizes members to action to improve social justice and their approach centers on joy, magic, and love. What is particular about the community is that they translate real-world human rights issues to the framework of the stories of their heroes to make it more accessible and fun (Jenkins, 2012).

Nike also used an inspiring storytelling context when launching a new range of sustainable sneakers, namely outer space. When launching the "Space Hippie" range, a line of sneakers made exclusively of recycled material, just before the COVID-19 pandemic outburst, Nike linked their sustainable product proposition to space exploration. This bold move was based on the premise that, like on Mars, where materials are scarce, planet Earth is also lacking supplies. They therefore created "Space Hippie," a

radical shoe design consisting out of scraps or "space junk", like recycled foam material, plastic or even t-shirts. The shoes had the lowest carbon footprint of any Nike product to date. While unable to sell the range on the date it was announced due to the pandemic, the story created such anticipation that on their actual launch, the sneakers sold out in minutes. As to the stakeholder engagement outlined above, proposing an aspirational environment will multiply stakeholder's engagement by tapping into their desired self: Nike's approach was successful because it tapped into the customer's aspirations to be space explorers, on top of the underlying desire to help reduce material waste.

4. Use the right media to bring your story to life (Action)

The medium of the story can be considered equally important for the effective delivery of the story, as the contents of the story itself. Some media are richer and more engaging than others. For instance, videos are more immersive and interactive than print ads for storytelling purposes (Dessart & Pitardi, 2019). A wide array of traditional and emerging technologies can be considered in delivering storytelling content, but also as tools to better engage stakeholders (de Regt et al., 2020).

We propose a two-dimensional characterization of media through which different stakeholder groups can be engaged into sustainability storytelling (see Figure 3). The vertical axis ranges from low- to high-tech and concerns the level of technology involved in the storytelling. "Low-tech" media approaches use little to no technology, whereas "High-tech" solutions involve more (advanced) technologies and can even be entirely virtual (De Keyser et al., 2019). The horizontal axis refers to the extent of real-world impact of the action undertaken as part of the storytelling: do actions enable addressing a real-world sustainability issue and do people perceive that the action makes a difference? "Direct impact" solutions, involve physical engagement of the stakeholders and field actions and are thus likely to have a more powerful and rapid impact on sustainability outcomes (Leroi-Werelds & Matthes, 2022). "Indirect impact" media on the other hand, tend to be further from the reality of the field and, as such, do not have an immediate effect on physical sustainability outcomes, such as activities and experiences in the virtual realm. Instead, indirect impact focuses on planting the seeds

and creating awareness. Next, we provide some illustrations of storytelling through media that have been identified as relevant in both the literature and in business practice.
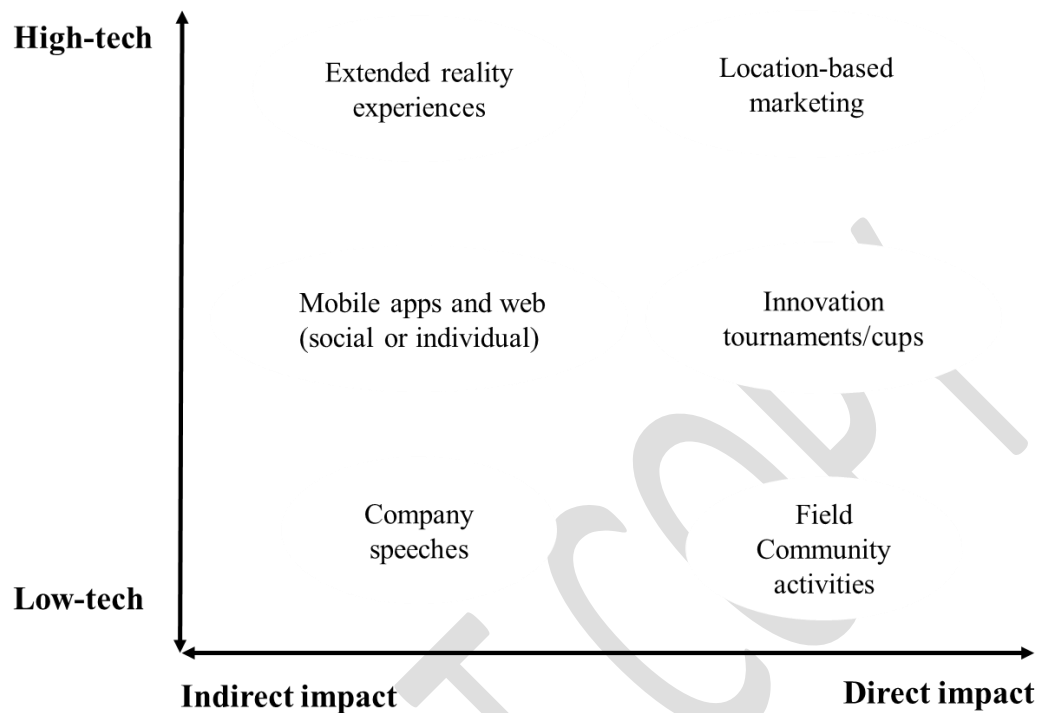

Figure 3: Storytelling media

Extended reality (XR) is a very engaging medium to co-create a story with stakeholders, because the receiver is physically active when they experience the XR environment, whether through augmented, or virtual reality. By interacting with the environment, the user co-creates what happens to him/her and makes decisions, thus manipulating the plot of the story in real life. Thanks to very high levels of immersion, XR technologies have particularly strong impacts on user attitudes and perceptions, resulting in high value-creation (de Regt et al., 2020). As an example, a virtual reality game called "Every Can Counts" (see Appendix 1) educates young people about waste sorting and recycling. Through the game, players can learn about the value of aluminum as a raw material and gain knowledge about proper waste recycling disposal systems. As they progress through the recycling activities, players earn points depending on the level of difficulty.

Location-based marketing is high-tech, using geo-location data of a mobile phone, and can have high, direct impact. An example is provided by Philip Morris International (PMI), the tobacco

company behind brands like Marlboro. In July 2020, PMI launched the initiative "Our World is Not an Ashtray" to raise awareness about cigarette butt littering and to inspire people (especially customers) to reduce and remove litter. As part of this, they partnered with Litterati, a mobile app and online platform that aims to remove litter from the streets. Users of this app can take a geo-tagged picture of litter, the type of which is then identified through artificial intelligence. Based on the aggregated data, litter problem areas and trends can be identified and acted upon by companies and governments alike. To incentivize users to clean up, groups are formed and campaigns at different geographical scales are organized. Moreover, this partnership empowers user storytelling as they encourages them to share pictures and stories of the positive impact they have. Finally, the website features inspirational video stories from individuals and organizations that act to reduce litter.

Mobile apps and websites can be used actively (users can post, scan, add info, tilt or shake the device) or rather passively (users just lurk at what others are doing/posting). For instance, following the introduction of the NutriScore in several European countries (France, Belgium, Spain, Luxembourg, Germany and The Netherlands), Belgian company SmartWithFood created a mobile app that allows obtaining the score of each food item in a shopping list, as well as provides inspiration for recipes. Major national retailers like Colruyt Group are partnering with the app to provide the experience to their shoppers. Yuka is another well-known mobile app that engages users in checking the quality of the goods they consume on a regular basis. These technologies are numerous and very engaging for the users.

Mobile apps and websites can involve varying levels of immersion and richness, ranging from text-based, over pictures, to audio and video. Videos can transmit emotions and moral gist in a deeper and more impactful manner than other forms of media (Pera & Viglia, 2016). For instance, AG Insurance, market leader in the Belgian insurance industry, launched an initiative to raise awareness about loneliness and to prevent or help overcome related mental health issues (see Appendix 1). In addition to an online platform that brings together people feeling lonely with (professional) caregivers, they made a video that features protagonists in a very personal way, for instance by using their first name prominently. The characters are portrayed such that different viewers can easily relate to them. On top

of that, AG Insurance has developed an educational package to be used in classrooms. A key component of this package is a 3 episodes mini-series called "(In)Visible" that brings the story of a high school girl that wants to overcome her feelings of loneliness. Finally, mobile apps and websites can include social media (sharing) features that facilitate bottom-up storytelling.

Innovation tournaments or cups can be a mix of physical and tech and also rather engaging while anyone you can also just be a spectator. For instance, chemical company BASF set up an online "Creator Space" program that focused on co-creating (open) innovations with the community about smart energy, food and urban living, in which more than 6,000 stakeholders engaged, coming from industry, academia, and government. This led to real-world projects implemented across the world, for instance to make energy-efficient housing affordable to low-income families or to sanitize water in polluted environments.

Company speeches are a medium for storytelling that generates limited active participation by stakeholders (even if it can be relayed in a promotional video afterwards). These speeches can be company-internal or external. Press conferences are one such type of an external speech. In the launch of their (RED) partnership, Stellantis group organized a press conference entitled "Planting the seed of our future" in their headquarter town of Turin, inviting (RED) co-founder Bono. They explained their partnership, vision, and the pledge of Stellantis to be more sustainable. Such speeches have the benefit of being very impactful for those involved, including partners, media representatives, some employees and other guests (see Appendix 1). The impact is limited for the wider pool of stakeholders not physically attending, with less than 500 views on YouTube in the span of 6 months.

Field activities are low tech but also extremely engaging for the stakeholders, at least behaviorally, and have a strong direct impact on sustainability outcomes. Employee engagement schemes that have a sustainable dimension have become commonplace and brands often describe them in their sustainability reports, while not always massively communicating about it. A case in point is provided by Morgan Stanley with their giving back program (see above). Premium watchmaker IWC Schaffhausen also strongly invests time and resources in community volunteering and sponsoring, where employees participate to field actions, for instance by donating food or helping children with

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disabilities through events and contests. At IWC Schaffhausen, these actions are barely mentioned in the sustainability report and not communicated to the wider public: such modest promotion reinforces the feeling of genuine motivations related to pride for those involved internally.

The end

We have proposed four strategic elements for successful sustainability storytelling, which can be referred to as the 4 A's that stand for: Aim, Actors Aspiration, and Act. Applying these elements collectively allows to increase authenticity and believability, so as to avoid negative reactions from stakeholders (i.e. washing perceptions). Beyond these four storytelling elements, there needs to be clear markers of change from status quo to more sustainable action in the plot. Often, a paralysis between intention and actual action exists in sustainable behavior, so the story must show the consequences of one's actions more prominently than in non-sustainable storytelling. Helping the audience to clearly understand, visualize and measure sustainability impact is critical. Fiat provides such an example by stating that each sale of a (RED) car contributes to their four billion dollar donation to the (RED) cause. Indeed, our propositions rest on the fundamental pillar that companies need to go further than the storyline if they are to be believed in their claims of sustainability, and that they need to act transparently. Customers and other stakeholders need to be able to easily verify that the brand is acting on its promise and have a very clear and transparent view on their practices.

In closing, storytelling can represent a powerful tool for sustainability communication. Even companies recovering from a sustainability-related scandal or anti-sustainable companies, for whom stakeholders' group motives and agendas inevitably differ (Clark, Lages, & Hollebeek, 2020), can benefit from a coherent storytelling approach, as long as the company is genuine in its sustainability claims and motivations.

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Appendix 1: Examples and resources (the resources were last accessed on July 21st, 2022)

Company	Idea represented	Link to resource
Walt Disney Company	Stakeholder pressure to take a stance	https://edition.cnn.com/2022/04/15/perspectives/disney-dont-say-gay/index.html
Tesla	Born sustainable	https://www.tesla.com/about
Patagonia	Born sustainable	https://www.patagonia.com/activism/ Michel, G.M., Feori, M., Damhorst, M.L., Lee, Y., Niehm, L.S. (2019) Stories We Wear: Promoting Sustainability Practices with the Case of Patagonia. *Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal*, 48(2), 165–180.
Tony's Chocolonely	Born sustainable – Start with the "why": transforming ecosystems or society with sustainability values at the core	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FsyxMCCREPs
Innocent	Green washing	https://www.theguardian.com/media/2022/feb/23/innocent-tv-ad-banned-for-claiming-its-drinks-help-environment
Dove	Start with the "why": highlighting sustainability values	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XpaOjMXyJGk Dessart, L., & Pitardi, V. (2019). How stories generate consumer engagement: An exploratory study. *Journal of Business Research*, 104, 183-195.
Total Energies	Start with the "why": repositioning toward sustainability	https://totalenergies.com/sustainability
Meta	Start with the "why": repositioning toward sustainability after a crisis	https://hbr.org/2021/11/facebooks-rebrand-has-a-fundamental-problem
Staples	Engaging internal stakeholders	https://www.staples.com/sbd/cre/noheader/about_us/corporate-responsibility/
Morgan Stanley	Engaging internal stakeholders – Use the right media: field activities	https://www.morganstanley.com/about-us/giving-back
EDO Queensland	Engaging internal and external stakeholders	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ULDsc9DpEI https://chuffed.org/project/high-court-climate-case
RED & Fiat	Associate with partners – Use the right media: company speeches	https://www.red.org/how-red-works https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=inGgetYTWt

		https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j9_upuvzDIY
		https://www.stellantis.com/content/dam/stellantis-corporate/sustainability/csr-disclosure/fca/fca_2020_sustainability_report.pdf
		https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j9_upuvzDIY
Formula E	Associate with partners	https://www.fiaformulae.com/en/discover/sustainability
		Standaert, W., & Jarvenpaa, S. L. (2016). Formula E: Next Generation Motorsport with Next Generation Fans. *International Conference on Information Systems*.
UEFA	Use aspirational contexts	Outraged documentary:
		https://www.uefa.com/insideuefa/news/0264-11282ebbd861-b794ba761ec1-1000--outraged-football-unites-to-confront-discrimination-in-new-uefa/
		https://www.uefa.tv/video/vod/204831
Fandom Forward	Use aspirational contexts	https://fandomforward.org/mission
		Jenkins, H. (2012). 'Cultural Acupuncture': Fan Activism and the Harry Potter Alliance. In *Transformative Works and Fan Activism*, 10.
Nike	Use aspirational contexts	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sm9r_Zs2z6s
Every can counts	Use the right media: extended reality	https://www.vrisch.com/projects/jede-dose-zaehlt-virtual-reality-game
Philip Morris International	Use the right media: location-based marketing	https://www.pmi.com/media-center/press-releases/press-release-details/?newsId=22656
		https://www.worldnoashtray.com/en/litterati/
		https://www.litterati.org/
Smart with Food Yuka	Use the right media: mobile apps	https://www.smartwithfood.com/
		https://yuka.io/en/
AG Insurance	Use the right media: video	Loneliness campaign:
		Website: https://allentegeneenzaamheid.be/
		Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7eidRepcTuU
		Educational program: https://edtv.be/nl/themas/eenzaamheid
BASF	Use the right media: innovation tournaments, or cups	https://www.basf.com/global/en/media/news-releases/2016/04/p-16-185.html
IWC Schaffhausen	Use the right media: field activities	https://www.iwc.com/en/company/sustainability-at-iwc.html