

Marketing Review St.Gallen

The Role of Marketing
in the Green Economy



Schwerpunkt

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A Framework for
Sustainable Impact

Achieving a sustainable economy within the planetary boundaries requires a broader focus on corporate sustainability measures and better impact measurement. These aspects should be reflected in sustainable brand management. The proposed framework addresses these requirements and proposes a holistic impact perspective for brand management.

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Despite the omnipresence of sustainability in marketing/corporate communication over the past 10 years, the actual impact has been disappointing: Six out of nine planetary boundaries have already been crossed, while we are rapidly approaching the remaining three (Richardson et al., 2023; Rockström et al., 2023). Massive uncertainties and risks threaten the livelihoods and economic foundations of our societies (Ripple et al., 2023; WEF, 2023).

From a corporate responsibility perspective, an appropriate response to this challenge appears to be the consistent development of sustainable management methods towards a more holistic view. This should include the company's impact on crossing planetary boundaries and encourage efforts to reduce the company's footprint.

Furthermore, contextualization of sustainability performance is needed to gain clarity on whether strategic, operational, and communicative measures are making a substantial contribution to sustainable transformation (Yi et al., 2022).

Brand Management and Green Marketing

Sustainability management and its strategic foundations have arrived in the corporate world: The 2024 Sustainability Transformation Monitor (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024) shows that 98% of all German companies, out of 362 companies surveyed, consider sustainability to be strategically relevant. 60% have some form of climate targets, and 80% of company managers feel increasingly responsible for sustainability (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024).

At the same time, however, many renowned companies appear to be missing their climate targets and net-zero commitments (Clancy, 2024). And their customers are not convinced – on the

contrary: Although consumers see companies as being primarily responsible for greater sustainability, they are also perceived as being the least sustainable (Rühle, 2023), and skepticism about corporate sustainability communication is evident (Utopia, 2024).

The challenge for sustainable brand management and green marketing therefore is to become more relevant in terms of content so that green communication remains meaningful, and to provide clear guidance and orientation to those who are currently not, or no longer, being reached.

To achieve this, it is necessary to address a core problem of sustainability marketing and communication. The current essence of sustainability communication and marketing is a relative self-assessment of companies, which at best shows whether a company is active at all and whether it is improving over time or not. Reporting on tangible impacts, mechanisms of action and the embedding of the company in a larger context is rare.

It has been debated for decades (cf. GRI II, 2002) that sustainability management and communication only make sense if they are linked to their ecological, social, and cultural context, i.e., if it is clear how exactly the company's performance has a positive or negative effect and if it oper-



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ates within our concrete biophysical and sociocultural boundaries.

In sustainability/ESG reporting, this situation has been recognized by the specialist community. Intensive work is currently being done on contextualization, and new guidelines and standards are being developed (see Yi, 2022). These findings and the increasing demands on sustainability management in recent years cannot be ignored in marketing and brand management.

The goal should therefore be a new approach to sustainable brand management and communication. The brand personality of a company can no longer revolve around itself in isolation, with only selective connections to customers and markets. A brand must encompass all areas of responsibility of the company/product, considering the diverse relationships, dependencies, and influences and making them the subject of strategic brand management (Haski-Levental, 2021; Peterson, 2021). At the same time, the brand must be able to connect conceptually, linguistically and in terms of content to the scope and content requirements of integrated sustainability management.

Sustainability management can no longer be conceived without a clear cultural foundation, broad stakeholder involvement,

consideration of differentiated impact areas, or assessment of material issues (EU, 2023). The company must be regarded in its ecological and social network. Existing brand models don't adequately reflect this reality and are therefore unable to provide innovative impulses for the further development of sustainable marketing.

Management Summary

Achieving sustainable economic transformation is a collective societal task, and all measures must be consistently aligned with impact-oriented sustainability goals and a broad and cooperative management scope. The perspective of existing brand models is mostly limited to direct consumer and market relationships or simplified input-output relationships. The proposed framework transfers sustainability management principles to brand management and expands the limited view of existing models to a holistic, contextualized, stakeholder-orientated impact perspective.

Limitations of Traditional Brand Theories

A recap of the dominant brand (management) theories underscores the need for a broader impact perspective.

First-generation brand concepts focus on the information/sign dimensions of brands as a differentiating visual, verbal or symbolic identity of a commercial object (Kotler & Gertner, 2002). This instrumental understanding of brand management suggests a branding toolbox that is mainly concerned with naming, designing or packaging products (Burmam et al., 2023, p. 8). While sign theory provides

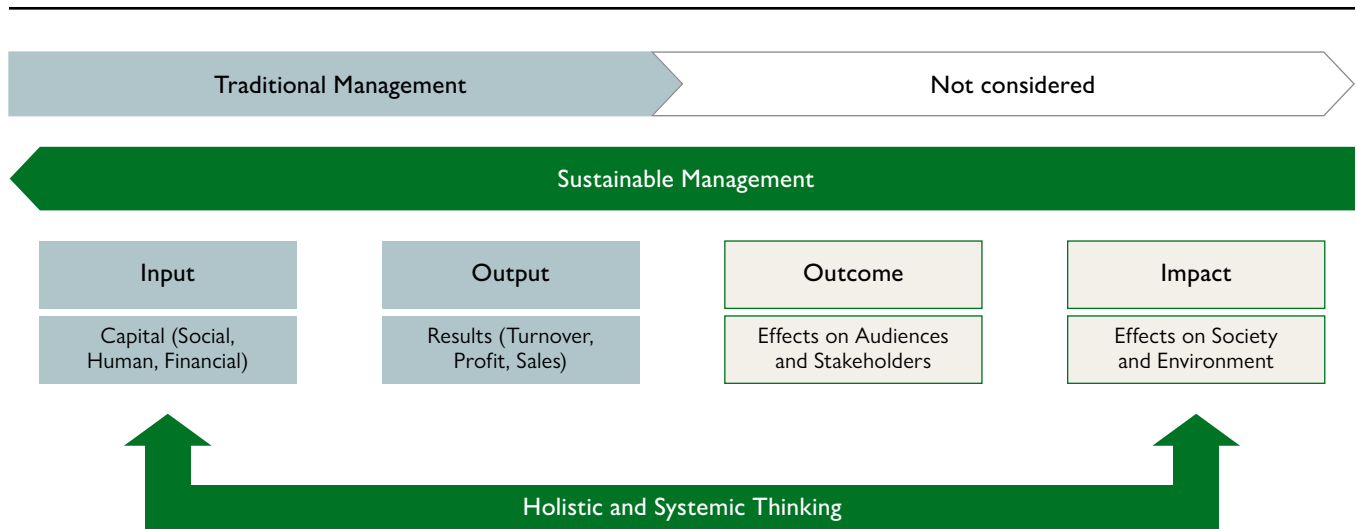
a basis for designing and defining brands, it is too narrow and too input-focused to account for sustainable impact.

In second-generation concepts, brands represent a set of tangible and intangible attributes towards which consumers develop attitudes and preferences and make choices (Oh et al., 2020). This functional understanding of brands in terms of product ranges and qualities (Burmam et al., 2023) has a strong sales orientation. For a sustainable brand impact approach, attribute theory lacks an outside-in per-

spective to analyze the complex brand discourses in the public arena.

Equity models look at the measurable added value of a brand, with an external, demand-side view of brand management. Ailawadi et al. (2003) identify three effects of brand equity: (a) customer mindset, measured as awareness, attitude or loyalty (Keller, 2012), (b) product market outcomes, e.g., price premiums or market share, and (c) financial market outcomes, e.g., brand value as a financial asset. Traditional concepts of brand

Figure 1: Traditional vs. Sustainable (Brand) Management



Source: Authors' illustration, based on Bungard & Schmidpeter, 2022.

equity fall short in terms of sustainability dimensions, stakeholder bandwidth, and brand relationships beyond the consumer, and do not take into account sustainable finance frameworks (Ishaq & Di Maria, 2020).

Brand identity concepts consider (socio) psychological dimensions of brands, such as subjective influences and emotions, and analyze the interaction between internal and external perspectives of the brand (Burmam et al., 2023). David Aaker (2010) defines brand identity as a management concept that integrates „brand as product,“ „brand as organization,“ „brand as person,“ und „brand as symbol,“ while Kapferer (2012) regards brand identity as upstream to brand image.

Most traditional (brand) management models propose an input-output relationship. They tend to exclude sociocultural, political, and ecological parameters as external impulses and ignore outcome and impact dimensions that sustainability management-oriented models would focus on (see figure 1).

An Impact-Oriented Theory of Brands

More recent concepts interpret branding at the level of holistic management: “Branding in a company is a total approach to managing a business, with the brand providing the key to company strategy and corporate culture. According to this definition, the brand becomes a central organizing function of the company and may prove to be the company’s most valuable asset” (Anholt, 2005, p. 117).

Paradigm Shift in Brand Theory

To conceptualize brand meaning in the narrow form of a “stimulus-organism-response paradigm within a linear associative model of behaviour” (Mick, 1988,

p. 2) has met with justified criticism. Gummesson points out: “If society is a network of relationships but marketing only recognises this in a footnote or subgroup to some other classification, something is fundamentally wrong; a paradigm shift is called for” (Gummesson, 2002, p. 336).

Meffert and Burmann (2005) described the deepening and broadening of the brand concept. Brands delve deeper into societal aspects with a stronger focus on internal audiences or specific communities and broaden towards branding public or non-profit entities (Baumgart, 2014, p. 10).

This deeper and broader application has led to a more socio-cognitive, discourse-analytic perspective of branding (Mick, 1988). Brand meaning is not the result of a one-directional managerial order (Christensen & Askegaard, 2001); rather, brands are key players in societal discourses: “Branding is a core activity of

capitalism, so must be included in any serious attempt to understand contemporary society and politics” (Holt, 2006, p. 300).

The sociopolitical approach to brands posits an intense relationship between brand meanings and contextual structures and processes (Thompson, 2004, p. 98). More than just a symbolic source for the construction of individual identity, brands are interpreted as symbols of sociocultural debates (Holt et al., 2004, p. 71). Consumers, citizens, and other stakeholders are co-creators of brands – “they have moved out of the audience and onto the stage” (Pralhad & Ramaswamy, 2000, p. 80).

Brands in Changing Political Contexts

The sustainability transformation of companies exemplifies this societal shift in brand management. Changing consumer demands, as discussed above, and political regulations, such as the European Green Deal approved by the European Commission in 2019, are making impact orientation mandatory for companies and brands.

For example, the recently adopted EU Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) requires a double materiality analysis: Companies not only have to report on their social and environmental impacts (= inside-out), but also need to assess potential environmental and societal impacts in reverse (= outside-in) (European Commission, 2022). For sustainable brand management, these impacts can be both risks to brand safety and opportunities for brand engagement.

The following new EU frameworks will also have a strong impact on future brand management:

- Empowering Consumers for the Green Transition Directive, strengthening consumer rights and protecting fair competition

Main Propositions

- 1 Corporate sustainability management increasingly focuses on the effective impact of measures.
- 2 Impact is also gaining importance in the regulation and standardization of sustainability reporting.
- 3 EU Green Deal induced programs will significantly drive sustainability-related brand activation.
- 4 Brand transformation will be aligned with current concepts of sustainable corporate management.
- 5 Brand management needs to take a holistic view of all areas of responsibility.

- Green Claims Directive, with mandatory third-party validation for environmental claims
- Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation (ESPR), including the Digital Product Passport (DPP)
- Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD), embedding human rights and environmental aspects in business operations and corporate governance
- Packaging and Packaging Waste Regulation (PPWR)
- Product Environmental Footprint (PEF) and Organization Environmental Footprint (OEF) to measure the life cycle environmental performance of products and organizations.

This non-exhaustive list identifies new requirements for brands in terms of transparency, reliability or findability of information, or practical issues such as brand design and impact reporting. The frameworks are intended to provide a level playing field for competitors, e.g. by preventing unfair advantages based on greenwashing. But they also open up a strategic spectrum for brands,

from simply complying with laws to leading by shaping markets.

A New Framework for Sustainable Brand Management

In this context, the authors propose a new brand (management) framework based on a structure that is well established in sustainability and climate management. In the Greenhouse Gas Protocol (GHG), scopes 1–3 are used to categorize direct and indirect emissions a company creates in its own operations as well as in its wider value chain. More recently, a fourth scope on avoided emissions (Russell, 2019) has been added to the discussion.

Accordingly, it is proposed to rethink sustainable brand management in scopes 1 to 4 and to broaden the perspective from mostly self-referential input-output relations to embedding brand management in impact-oriented stakeholder and materiality frameworks.

The scopes of the framework are interdependently connected in both an inside-out and an outside-in-perspective.

Scope 1: Performance Dimension

Scope 1 refers to the actual sustainability performance of a company or product brand. It includes all strategies, approaches, measures, and campaigns that shape or reflect the company's own sustainable actions in the creation of products or services.

Complying with regulatory obligations in the form of reports (e.g. CSRD, CSDDD), passports (e.g. DPP), or labels (e.g. energy) is part of this sustainable brand duty, as this will inform the consumption or investment decisions of stakeholders.

Scope 1 articulates the elements of the company's sustainability strategy, such as materiality analysis, carbon footprints, emission reduction plans, compensation or contribution mechanisms, transformation roadmaps, ESG governance structures, etc.

Scope 1 also encompasses all foundations and underpinnings of how a brand appears in the sustainability arena, such as cultural values and purpose, mission and vision, narratives, pledges, brand voice, look & feel, and so on – comparable to the brand identity concept (Burmam et al., 2023).

Scope 2: Co-creation Dimension

The second scope includes strategies, approaches, measures and campaigns that relate to stakeholders and external partners, such as suppliers or retailers, regulators, NGOs, etc., who co-create the brand's indirect sustainable value.

Sustainable brand management is necessarily collaborative along the entire value chain. For example, as discussed above,

Lessons Learned

- 1 The development and management of a sustainable brand strategy needs to be synchronized with the needs and goals of sustainable corporate management.
- 2 A company's double materiality analysis is a valuable starting point for impact-oriented sustainable brand planning.
- 3 Companies need to broaden their approach to take a holistic view of all relevant areas of influence and key stakeholder relationships.
- 4 Corporate and product brand perspectives on sustainability have to be aligned to avoid greenwashing and to ensure that inside-out and outside-in perspectives overlap.
- 5 Brand marketing execution has to make sure to reduce the corporate and brand footprint and increase the handprint and brainprint.

supply chain due diligence regarding human rights or environmental effects is mandatory for many companies, just as third-party validation of sustainability claims requires cooperation with trusted external institutions.

Sustainability frameworks such as GWÖ/ Common Good or B-Corp are based on a collaborative understanding of competition and underscore the importance of co-entrepreneurship among like-minded companies.

Many remarkable sustainability initiatives are based on cross-sector partnerships with mutual benefits, e.g., between NGOs and brands, or with advocacy groups, scientific institutions or influencers. And (industry) associations or joint initiatives by several brands are also often the starting point for high-impact campaigns.

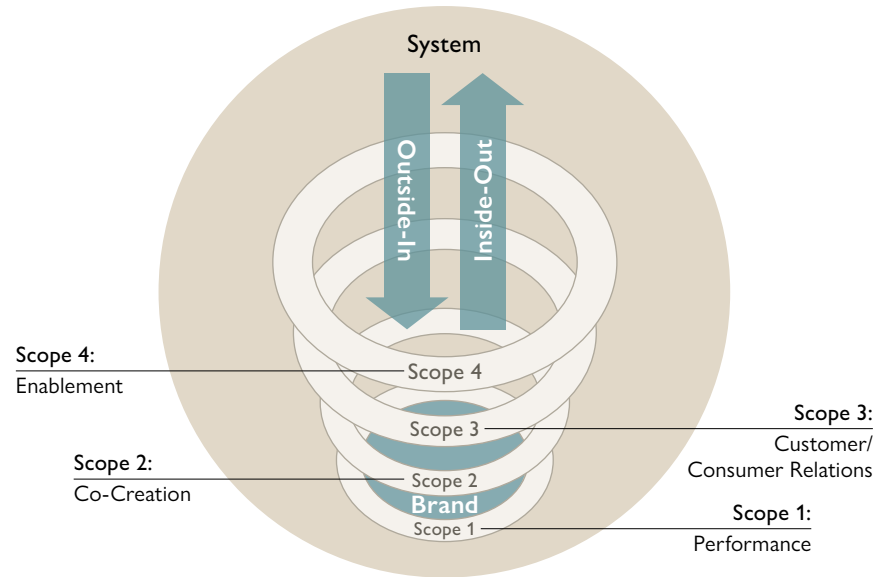
Scope 3: Consumer/Customer Relations Dimension

Scope 3 is defined as strategies, approaches, measures or campaigns that address the recipients/users of a brand's added impact value and motivate them to purchase or use the brand on the basis of sustainable principles and consumer responsibility.

As shown above, the demand for sustainable products has constantly increased in recent years, as has the empowerment of consumers to take on their share of responsibility. As a result, guiding choices is an essential function for sustainable brands. In most GHG strategies, scope 3 is expected to have the most significant impact, especially in the downstream perspective.

The efficient use of purchased goods or services is also a key function of sustainable brands. Educating on modes of operation, care chains, repair or post-use recycling/reuse of products is an essen-

Figure 2: Scopes of Sustainable Branding



Source: Authors' illustration.

tial brand impact factor for both B2C and B2B stakeholders.

Scope 4: Enablement Dimension

Scope 4 goes beyond direct value creation and refers to strategies, approaches, measures or campaigns that have a multiplier effect, i.e., create sustainable added value independently of the actual value creation, product use, etc.

Scope 4 is a relatively new perspective in the GHG protocol discussion – a voluntary metric for avoided emissions or those “that occur outside of a product's life cycle or value chain but as a result of the use of the product” (WEF, 2022).

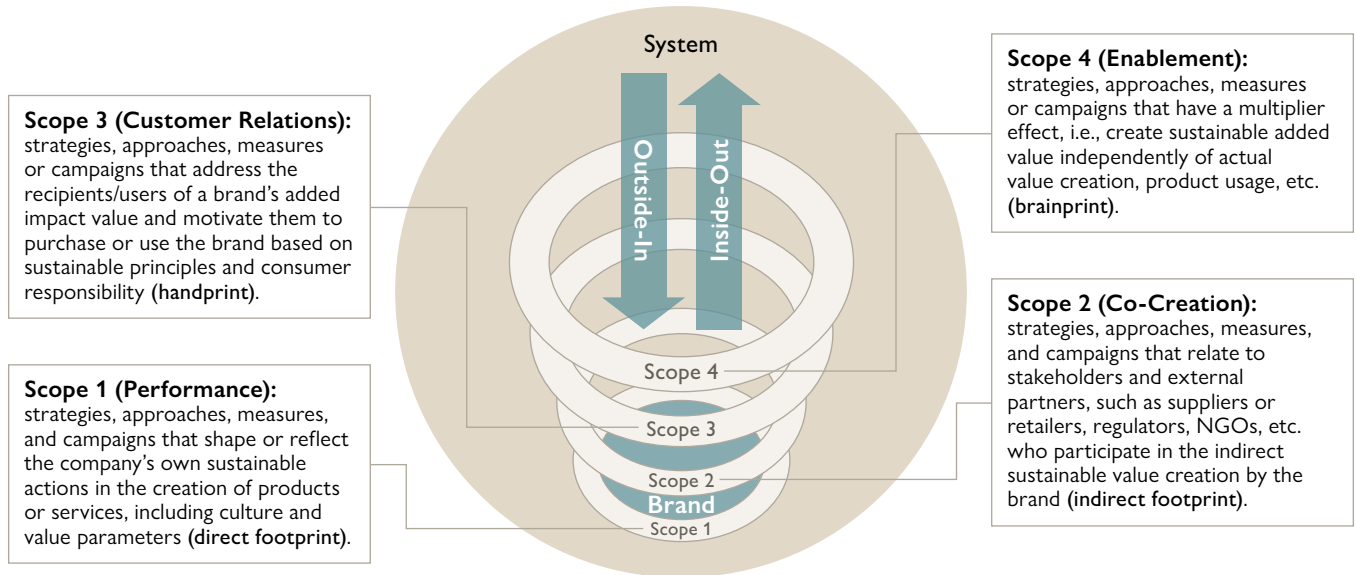
Thinking beyond a product's immediate value chain is an important perspective for sustainable brand management. The key questions for scope 4 are: How can a (product or corporate) brand inspire societal as well as a stakeholder's personal

transformation, encourage new habits or discussions and lead to new points of view with a positive contribution? In essence, how can brands enable change beyond their own value creation?

Discussion and Outlook

The proposed framework should be understood as a conceptual approach to relate contemporary sustainability management systems to brand management, and thus intends to take into account the relevant interdependent dimensions of sustainable brand management. Figure 2 summarizes the four scopes of sustainable brand management introduced and discussed above. The framework recognizes the holistic and systemic impacts expected from brands that address a broad range of stakeholder demands. Furthermore, the framework attempts to capture the reciprocal dynamics of inside-out and outside-in directions in terms of risks and opportunities as required, for example, by the CSRD regula-

Figure 3: Impact Framework for Sustainable Brand Management



Source: Authors' illustration.

tion mentioned above. A recent study by Kantar (2024) shows that brands can gain competitive advantage and contribute to brand equity by integrating sustainability dimensions, but only if they are well aligned with brand fundamentals such as brand purpose and based on robustly substantiated sustainability claims. This calls for an integrated approach to sustainable brand management, as suggested in the framework above.

Adapting and Enriching the Framework

The proposed framework can be enriched and contextualized by the differentiation between footprint, handprint, and brainprint, which has recently gained traction in sustainability discourses. As a counterpart to the footprint, which labels negative GHG emissions, the handprint has been introduced as an open concept for positive actions (Senthlage & Rostock, 2024). Scopes 1 and 2 in the brand framework refer to the direct and

indirect brand footprint, while scope 3 covers a brand's sustainability handprint. The handprint methodology is intended to help companies understand and showcase the positive impact of their products/services on customers and society (Hanf & Behm, 2024). The concept of the brainprint is intended to express the intellectual contribution of research institutions to reducing greenhouse gas emissions (Chatterton et al., 2015) and can be related to the inspirational value proposed for brands in scope 4.

Figure 3 summarizes the proposed impact framework for sustainable brand management.

Outlook on Implications and Applications

This framework has been created to synchronize brand and sustainability management approaches. Phenomena

such as greenwashing have shown that the almost schizophrenic coexistence of different realities – brand vs. sustainability management – should come to an end.


The tone and direction of the current EU sustainability regulation are evident: the two systems will need to send coherent signals to all relevant stakeholders, i.e., brand and sustainability management perspectives must be aligned with a company's areas of responsibility.

Some interesting implications seem worthy of future discussion:

- Sustainability-related corporate and product brand activities will become highly interdependent: corporate initiatives will need to be translated into product messages, and product brand claims will need to be anchored in corporate brand sustainability roadmaps.
- Each brand/marketing channel could be analyzed in footprint, handprint and brainprint dimensions, e.g., how can

production (video, events, etc.) or media be most efficient and circular, how can advertising empower and activate influence, how can sponsorships or partnerships inspire and nudge personal change?

- The concept of positioning – a marketing classic with rallying cries such as “differentiate or die – survival in our era of killer competition” (Trout, 2008) – might have to be rethought. Positioning used to describe how a brand relates to competitors in a category. Now positioning also describes how a brand relates to ecosystems or society, potentially creating a competitive cultural advantage (Holt et al., 2004).
- The mantra of integrated marketing used to mean channel integration and coordination of streamlined touchpoint messaging. For sustainable brands, integrated marketing means stakeholder integration.

The impact framework for sustainable brand management presented above could provide a solid structure for these perspectives. For this article, the framework is conceptual in nature, while work on validation based on case studies and recent campaigns is ongoing. Nonetheless, the discussion of directions and implications seems worthwhile. 

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