

The perception of PR in sustainability communications:

How to avoid greenwashing and be an advocate for change



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Introduction and methodology

The current climate of accountability for those with influence and power means organisations are held to higher standards than in previous years. Questions on ethics are an unavoidable part of modern PR, coming from the media, legislators, and consumers.

PR has a role and a responsibility in sustainability

A brand's ESG credentials have become as important to consumers as pricing and performance of products or services, and the public relations sector has taken note.

A [2022 PRCA and Opinium study](#) found that 96% of PR and comms professionals were already advising clients and coworkers on climate change. Practitioners can work towards a [Specialist Diploma in Sustainability Communications](#) with CIPR, or apply for B Corp status for their company. By 2023, around [25 PR agencies](#) had so far proved their ESG qualifications with the certification, joining brands known for their sustainability efforts including Patagonia, Aesop, and House of Hackney.

But are PRs doing enough to communicate sustainability credentials with transparency? And for the public relations sector itself? Is the messaging hitting the right stakeholders, and securing engagement and longer-term loyalty from consumers?

In this report, we chart the growth of the sustainability conversation over the last year, using [Pulsar](#) data from 1 Jan 2023 to 19 Feb 2024. Engagement is examined across broadcast, Google search, and social media platforms to track the ongoing discourse.

Data also comes from [Vuelio Insights](#) analysis throughout 2023, tracking press coverage to show the direct impact of successful PR on what stories the media chooses to amplify, and what the public then choose to share.

PR is now inextricably enmeshed in sustainability discourse – read on for the responsibilities that come with this new reality. Find out the long-term impacts greenwashing accusations can have on brands, and how to ensure your comms make PR a positive force in the fight for a cleaner climate, and future.

Data collection period

Pulsar:

1 January 2023 – 29 February 2024

Channels:

Online news, television, radio, podcasts, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Pinterest, X, Reddit, YouTube, blogs, forums, Amazon reviews, Tumblr, Google Search

Vuelio Insights:

1 January 2023 – 14 March 2023

Channels:

UK national/regional online news and trade-related publications

Markets/Languages

Global data collection

Analysis in English language

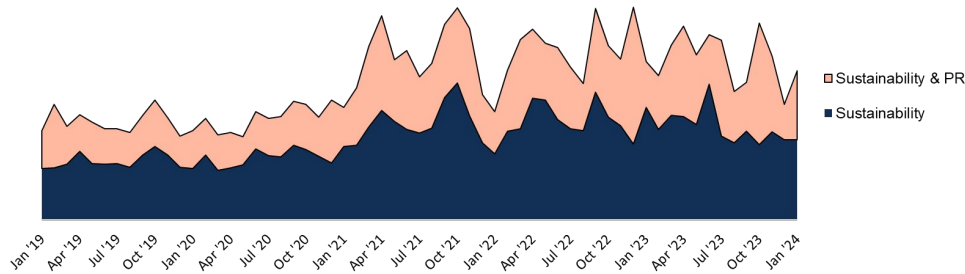
Chapter 1: Sustainability concerns have grown since 2019

March 2021 could be seen as a turning point in awareness of sustainability. As news outlets shared [imagery of renewal](#) during lockdowns across the world, the pandemic accelerated a greater consciousness of nature and climate change.

Mapping social interactions since January 2019 on X demonstrates how interest in the topic has grown, staying at an elevated level from 2021 to today.

Part of this online conversation? Use of the term 'PR' alongside 'sustainability'.

Why? While the PR industry has certainly upped its engagement with ESG concerns during this time period, questions from the public regarding business ethics and the possibility of greenwashing in company comms have tied the terms 'sustainability' and 'PR' together.



X mentions of sustainability and its association with PR between Jan 2019 and Jan 2024.
Source: Pulsar TRENDS

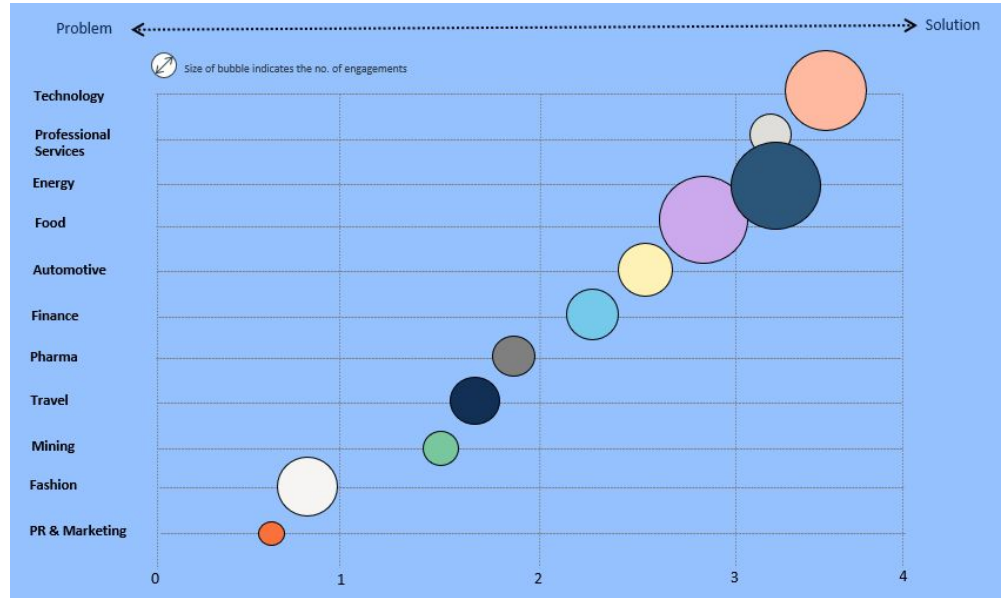
...but so have questions regarding the role of PR

Mapping the online sustainability conversation by industry sector highlights just how enmeshed PR is with the topic – to negative effect.

Tracking engagements across online news, broadcast (television, radio, podcasts), social media (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Pinterest, X, Reddit, YouTube, Tumblr), as well as blogs, forums, Amazon reviews, and Google Search shows which sectors are highly discussed as spaces for solutions rather than problems – Technology and Energy, for example.

However, engagement with PR & Marketing in this conversation – small as it is – firmly plants the comms sector in the problematic camp.

In this arena, PR has a PR problem to contend with.



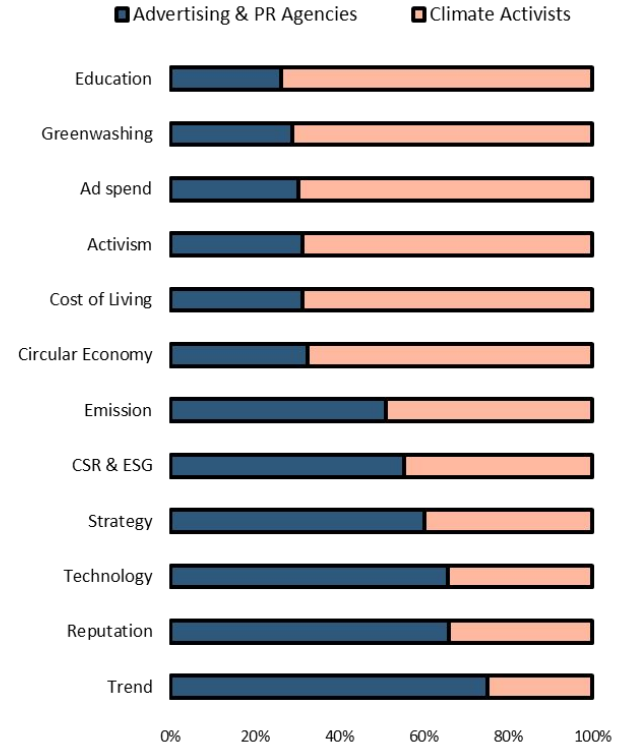
Sector breakdown by problem vs solution SOV in the Sustainability conversation between 1 Jan 2023 - 19 Feb 2024. Source: Pulsar TRAC

Negative engagement for 'PR and Marketing' in discourse around sustainability naturally comes from the widespread use of 'PR' and 'marketing' to describe any form of comms or advertising. But it also stems from targeted criticism towards the sector for its potential complicity in greenwashing.

PRs are unlikely to have missed coverage of [protests](#) and petitions against agencies working with fossil fuel clients. Groups including Clean Creatives invite practitioners to ['take the pledge'](#) to stop accepting commissions from these companies.

In fact, analysing the communities mentioning PR and comms alongside sustainability shows the discussion is driven primarily by those within the PR industry itself, alongside climate change activists pushing for accountability and change. The public relations industry knows it has a responsibility, so conversation focuses on trends and reputation alongside technology, strategy, and ESG.

The preoccupations of climate change activists? Education, greenwashing, and ad spend topics – elements PRs can tackle head-on in their comms.



Analysing audiences talking about sustainability in association with marketing between 1 Jan - 15 Dec 2023. Source: Pulsar TRAC

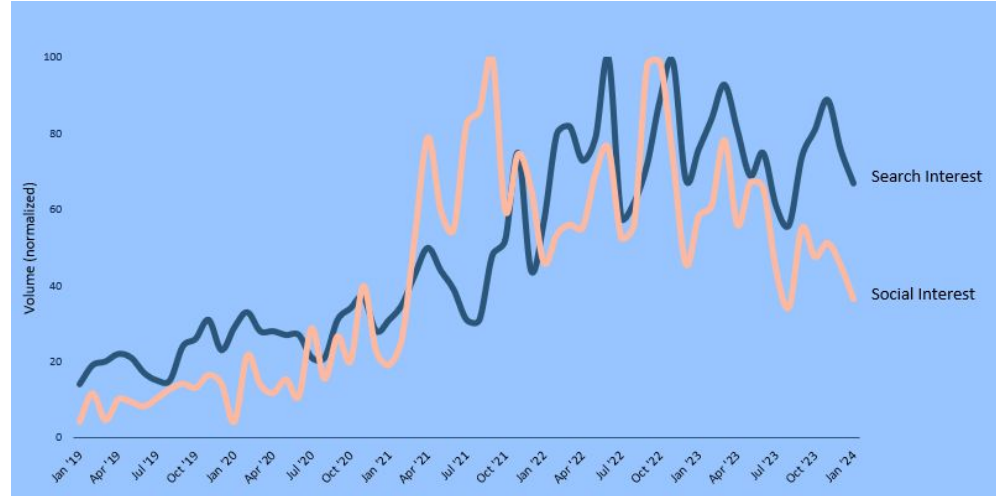
Chapter 2: Greenwashing – a key consideration for consumers

While ‘greenwashing’ was first coined in 1986 in an essay by environmentalist [Jay Westerveld](#), in 2024, the phrase has entered everyday use outside of academia – possibly to the consternation of many comms teams.

Examining ‘greenwashing’ mentions on X from January 2019 to the start of this year shows this steady rise in usage, as well as an increase in searches related to it – until a plateau in 2022.

What could be behind this saturation point? Its wide acceptance and use, of course, but also the other unavoidable challenge of modern times in the UK – the cost-of-living crisis.

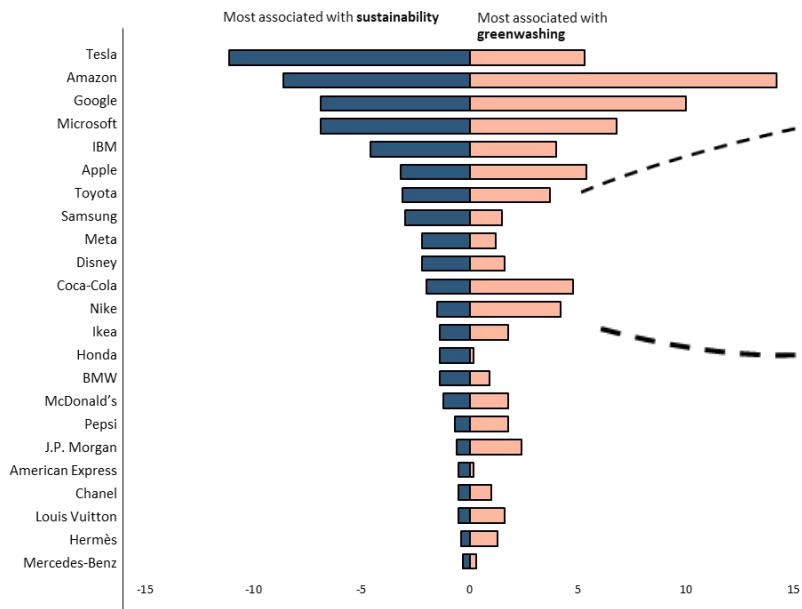
Growing inequality and unfair pricing has taken the place of sustainability as a key topic for those previously preoccupied with the subject of greenwashing. Each of these topics remain important to the consumer, and so should be a consideration for PRs tasked with engaging them.



Mentions of greenwashing on X and search volumes in the sustainability conversation between 1 Jan 2019 – 31 Jan 2024. Source: Pulsar TRAC

When it comes to sustainability-related reporting and conversations online, brands are more likely to trend for negative reasons. Looking at top brands featuring in this discourse, we see expected heavy hitters getting the share of engagement including Google, Microsoft, IBM, and Apple.

Amazon was regularly associated with greenwashing. Whether this will change with 2024's [Amazon Sustainability Accelerator](#) and the company's much-publicised investments in sustainability focused tech start-ups remains to be seen.



WE LOVE A GREENWASHING LAWSUIT nike can eat it as far as im concerned #sustainable #shopping #ecofriendly #greenwashing

Top brand associated with Sustainability & Greenwashing in the Sustainability conversation between 1 Jan 2023 – 19 Feb 2024. Source: Pulsar TRAC

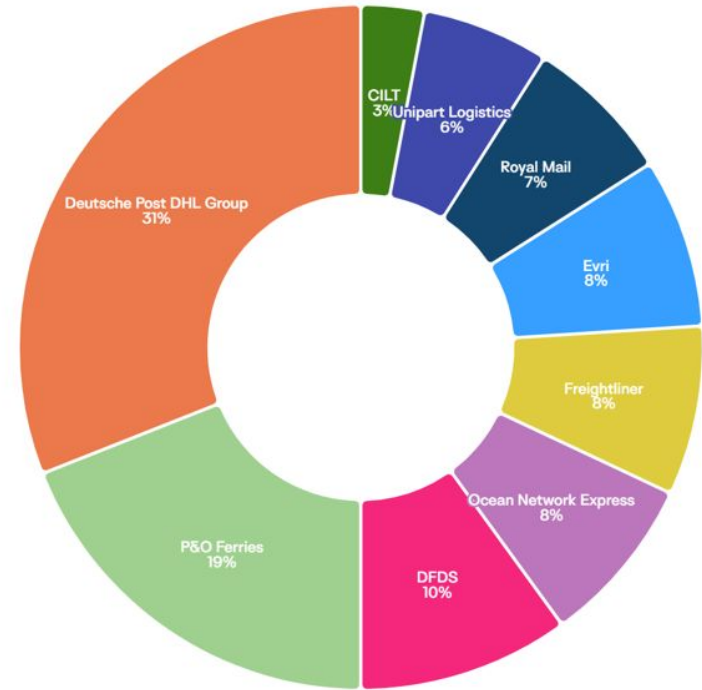
For a further look at brand reputation in relation to sustainability in the media, we tracked mentions of delivery companies – a sector with great responsibility when it comes to climate change – in the UK press from 1 Jan to 14 Mar 2023. This was a time of change for logistics companies as Hermes rebranded to [Evri](#) amid criticisms of its service, and CitySprint shared its commitments to a [sustainable future](#).

Findings from Vuelio’s Media Monitoring and Insights crowned Deutsche Post DHL Group as the brand with the highest volume of positive coverage throughout Q1 of 2023.

The brand secured national headlines for its climate efforts, which cited its [‘record sum’](#) invested in digitisation and sustainability.

ESG targets were also praised in 46% of its coverage, with headlines claiming the brand [‘walks the talk’](#).

In comparison, Royal Mail’s green initiatives didn’t receive as big of a share of the coverage. Why? The brand didn’t release as much sustainability-focused comms as Deutsche Post DHL Group.

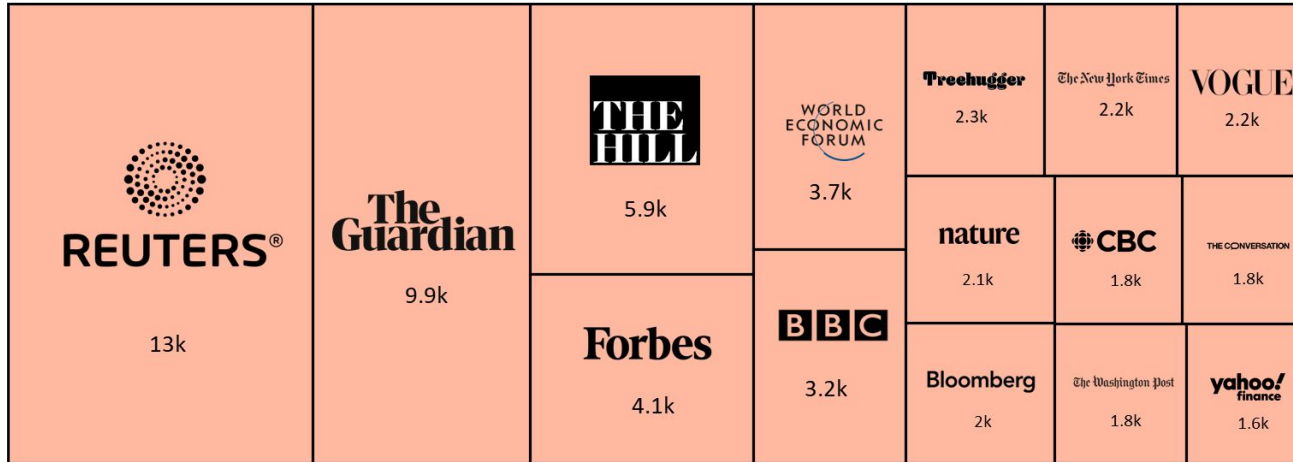


Data samples from 1 Jan – 14 Mar 2023. Coverage represents all national/regional online news and trade-related publications discussing climate action from delivery/logistics companies functioning in the UK (663 articles in total). Source: Vuelio Insights

Chapter 3: Which media dominates sustainability coverage?

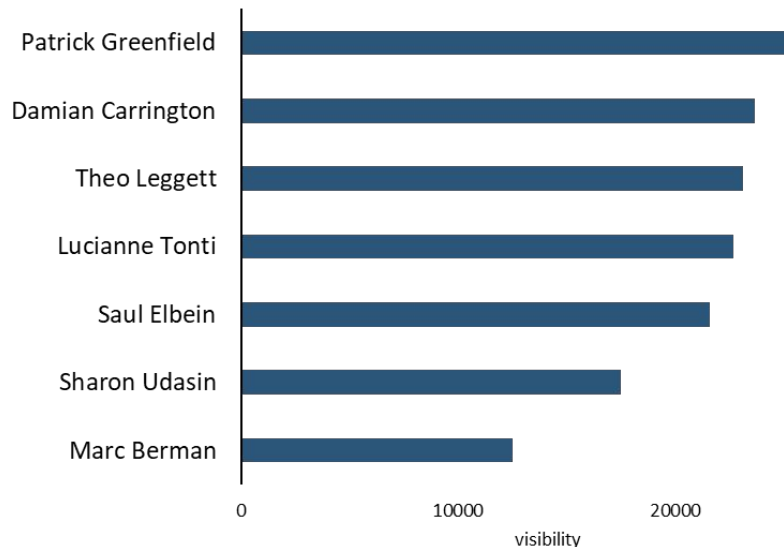
The most shared media in the sustainability conversation shows that left-of-centre outlets get the highest engagements and shares, with international news sources Reuters and The Guardian at the top. Perhaps less expected: Vogue placing above Bloomberg and Nature, showing that sustainability is now a major focus for consumer, retail, and lifestyle media and audiences.

Journalists – both staff and freelancers – working across national press, broadcast, consumer, and trade outlets regularly send sustainability-related requests to PRs via the [ResponseSource Journalist Enquiry Service](#). Get coverage for your organisation in outlets like The Guardian and Vogue by building targeted media lists and engaging with journalists directly with the [Vuelio Media Database](#).



The most shared media by credibility in the sustainability conversation between 1 Jan 2023 – 19 Feb 2024. Source: Pulsar TRAC

Journalists



The most engaged influencers in the Sustainability conversation between 1 Jan 2023 – 19 Feb 2024. Source: Pulsar TRAC

If you're a PR with close connections to the UK media, you're in luck – providing your messaging and reputation management is airtight. UK journalists have a significant influence on discourse around sustainability topics and their coverage gets high engagement.

Examining the most engaged influencers in the conversation places journalists at The Guardian and BBC News at the top for visibility. Reports have focused on issues with climate efforts, the everyday impact of climate change, as well as living costs and food shortages.

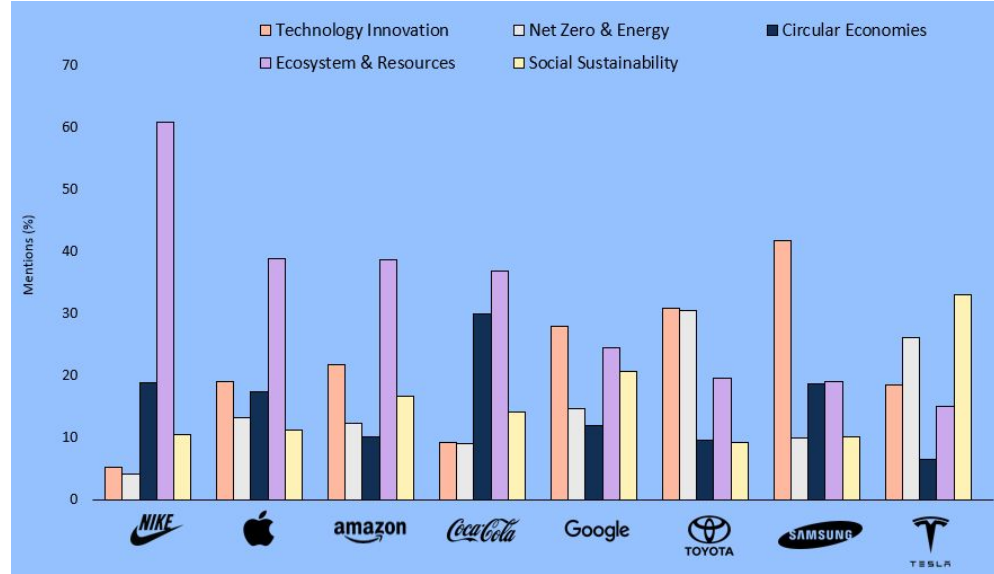
Coverage of specific brands from these media professionals reach plenty of audiences across the globe – for the good, and bad...

Chapter 4: How brands are shaping their reputation

With negative slants quicker to get press attention and shares across social media, how are brands shaping perceptions of their reputation within the wider discourse?

Analysis of the top brands mentioned in the sustainability conversation shows Nike getting the highest share of write-ups related to the topic of Ecosystem & Resources, alongside fellow consumer retailers Apple and Amazon. Sustainability initiatives feature in the coverage, but also workers' rights – something each brand has attracted its share of criticism for.

Net Zero and emission write-ups go to Tesla and Toyota – two brands that have also received critical reporting from the press. Most notably: accusations of greenwashing for Toyota.



Analysis of the top brands mentioned in the Sustainability conversation between 1 Jan 2023 – 19 Feb 2024. Source: Pulsar TRAC

Case study: Bacardi

While the brand name would have never conjured up sustainability associations in the minds of most consumers before now, Bacardi has been putting in the work over the last year. Its links with [Beyond Plastic](#) and '[greener makeover](#)' – engagement with genuine sustainability initiatives, and finding the right amplification for them across social media – have earned the drinks company positive reports.

Bacardi unveils 'greener makeover' at global, [...] leading the way to a #netzero future. #zerowaste #sustainability #EarthDay2023



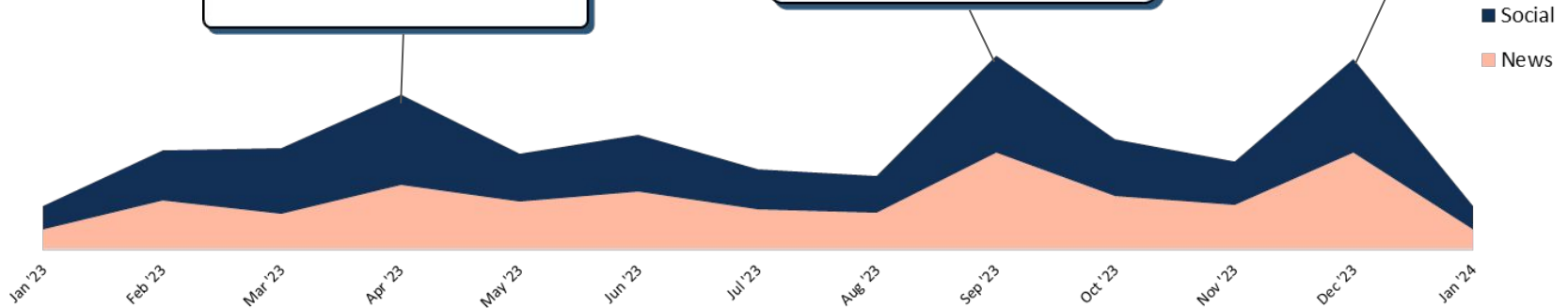
Bermuda-based Bacardi Limited – the world's largest privately held spirits company – recently celebrated the one-year anniversary of its link with Beyond Plastic.

As Alisa Bernardo reports, it's a prime example of how leading lights in the corporate and voluntary sectors can come together for the greater good



Bacardi cuts carbon footprint of glass bottle production in 'first' for spirits industry

11 DECEMBER 2023



Social v News mentions of Bacardi in the Sustainability conversation between 1 Jan 2023 – 31 Jan 2024. Source: Pulsar TRAC

Chapter 5: Tips to take away

1. Want to signal to stakeholders that you're trustworthy on sustainability? Team up with established organisations

For a [January 2023](#) report, the Vuelio Insights team found that brands which were part of the [Science-Based Targets initiative \(SBTi\)](#) had a much stronger chance of getting international coverage around sustainability efforts.

With over 4,000 businesses following the SBTi initiative since 2015, it has become an established benchmark for success within scientific journalism... and a shortcut to securing a good reputation when it comes to sustainability – providing you can prove your credentials.

2. Don't just react to negative coverage – be proactive to get positive press and public response

Got a plan in place to deal with a sustainability crisis? You might be too late – [Vuelio research](#) shows that the media are much less interested in reporting on positive efforts from brands following negative reports.

A proactive approach is much more effective – as demonstrated by the coverage of airline brands during the prolonged period of strikes and cancellations within the travel sector in 2022.

RyanAir was reactive, sharing positive news stories after negative peaks in coverage. However, these efforts did not get much media attention in contrast to the negative coverage. Virgin Atlantic released consistent and positive messaging surrounding a wide diversity of ESG efforts, before, during, and after the crisis. Media interest was much higher – proactive and reactive comms pay off.

3. Remember which generations will inherit the world we leave behind

75% of Generation Z – those born between 1997 and 2012 – are concerned about humanity's impact on the planet, according to data from [Unilever](#). Gen Z also happens to be an [incredibly important group](#) for [PRs to engage](#). With Generation Alpha on their heels and already engaging with the myriad of messaging surrounding them, what kind of world would you want them to inherit?

4. Check in on your peers and competitors for extra insight

With so many players in any given marketplace, it is essential to [consider competitors](#) in your media strategy. Analyse your competition in the context of important topics like sustainability, and for deeper insights, make use of [monitoring and insights](#) tools. Track household names in your space, as well as the more niche, or aspirational, up-and-comers to get the full picture.

5. Provide solutions and brighter ideas

Presenting hard realities has its place in PR, but people want to know how they can help make change.

[Curious PR Ltd](#)'s founder and managing director Hannah Kapff has been tasked with communicating sustainability topics from her time in broadcast journalism to her work for brands including Pfizer and in heavily-regulated sectors including environmental sustainability. She believes positivity is where to start with your messaging:

'The very language of this sector is changing fast. Terms such as 'ESG' have been somewhat hijacked, and as we know, words are everything. Control the language, and you control the people. Greenwashing and its nervous cousin, greenhushing, need to be tackled. These issues will grow new shoots.

'I've been predicting for years that it will become increasingly difficult to gain attention among the media (and thus the public) about issues of sustainability if the conversation is too negatively-framed.

'In short, the 'engaged public' (and, remember, a certain fraction never engage, whatever the message) want to hear about tangible solutions to "the problem" as opposed to more death, destruction, Armageddon. Internally, they are asking, "So, what can I do about this?"

'Our job as communicators is to point to solutions, or risk losing the audience.'

How Pulsar Group can help you

Vuelio Media Monitoring

Prove the effectiveness of your PR and comms tactics and provide a base for future planning through multi-channel media coverage categorised by sentiment, Share of Voice, and bespoke tags.

Vuelio Political Monitoring

Vuelio gives you full visibility of everything that's happening across Government, Parliament, stakeholder organisations, and social media, delivered in a way that works for you.

Pulsar

Apply audience intelligence to your strategy with social listening and audience segmentation. Spot potential crisis ahead with this AI-driven trend detector to plan your strategy.



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