KNOW HOW GUIDE TO COMMUNICATING SUSTAINABILITY TO GUESTS

June 2015

If you have some great environmental or social initiatives at your hotel, you may well want to tell people about them. But how to do that? Many sustainability messages fail because they are just put out as a list of facts without thought to how they might be received. This Know How Guide is designed to help you avoid some of the common mistakes and get your message to your guests more effectively.

Why do you want to communicate?

It's worth taking a step back to consider why you want to communicate your sustainability efforts in the first place. Do you want to get more bookings by differentiating your property? Enter new markets? Do you want to get your customers to support your efforts, e.g. choosing certain products, supporting your charities or engaging in the linen-change option, or just impress your customer? Whatever your reasons, these options will all require different approaches, so read on.

Who do you want to communicate to, and how?

Corporate customers are increasingly asking questions of their hotel suppliers, such as the carbon footprint, water consumption and waste per occupied room. Using the Hotel Carbon Measurement Initiative (HCMI) methodology will help you respond to questions about carbon footprint. The Global Business Travel Association (GBTA) and other RFP templates are useful reference to the type of question asked. Even if your customers are not yet asking, it's wise to be prepared for when they do. You don't want to be the hotel that can't communicate! Remember though that the corporate customer is the company booking and not the person travelling, so whilst the company may out demands on their hotel suppliers, this may have little or no relevance to the business traveller themselves.

Customers are not all the same and you need to know what kind of customer you have, or what kind of customer you want to attract, and which messages resonate with them. Responsible tourism communications consultancy Respondeco divides customers into three brackets;

1. the **"What's in it for me?"** type who are not too interested in sustainability but are prepared to be persuaded. So don't separate out sustainability as it does not factor guests' choices and they may be suspicious that sustainable choices make them lose out on something. It is important to think about sustainability as a quality issue;
    - **Quality of service:** Hotels which care about people and the environment are likely to also care about all aspects of the hotel service.
    - **Quality of experience:** Positioning your hotel as one which offers well-sourced products, including fixtures and fittings, amenities, food; well-looked after staff, an interest in the local environment and engagement with the local community, makes it a much more interesting proposition for potential guests than a hotel that just talks about how it reduces its environmental impact.

Soneva and Nikoi Island are really good examples of how sustainability is completely embedded in the guest experience. Guests don't have to be eco warriors to appreciate use of natural materials, surrounded by nature, good service through staff wellbeing, and so forth. So don't miss the opportunity to tell them how your sustainability initiatives enhance their experience. Start telling the story of what difference it is going to make to the guest.

2. the **"not bothered"** who want to switch off and relax. Being too heavy on sustainability messages can turn them off. Research from DEFRA and the University of Surrey in the UK in 2007 indicates how guests have come to your property to relax and they want to feel happy and comfortable, however long their stay or their reason for staying. They have paid their money so they may be inclined to be a little more selfish than at home, taking longer showers, leaving the lights on, and getting their linens changed daily. They certainly don't want to be preached at or to be made to make choices that make them feel they are having to give something up or make an extra effort. The message to this group is more that 'we've done this so you don't have to' and to do the work behind the scenes.

3. the **"I care about the planet and society"** who genuinely want to see what difference you make. With this audience you have to be prepared to be put under scrutiny and possibly answer questions about your initiatives and any claims around them. This is a minority at the moment and it is important to be realistic; most of the time guests choose hotels on the basis of price, location, availability and quality – but the number of people who look to buy

products and services from companies which share their values is growing and the trend is only going to continue in that direction.

It is less a matter of working out which kind of guest you have (though if you have a clear idea, that can be quite handy) as in practice you are going to have all 3 types. It is more a matter of making sure there is a balance of messages and information so that all 3 are satisfied with their stay.

Tell your story

You do not have to be operating a lodge in the rainforest to have stories to tell. It may appear to be more challenging if you are in an urban area but just look at the great case studies we have, from airport hotels such as the Hotel Verde in Cape Town and the Heathrow Marriott, Wyndham's Super 8 brand - budget hotels frequently located on highways which excel in their environmental initiatives, and the Ramada Ajman UAE which is noted for its green initiatives and charitable support in a region where sustainability is often less visible.

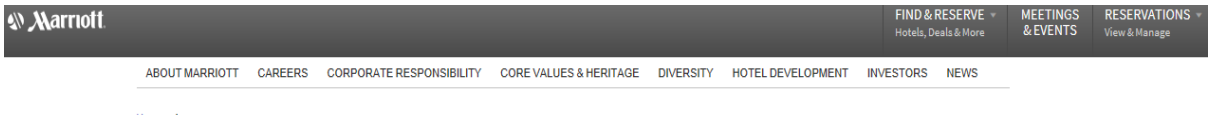
Everyone can find a story. Questions to ask are what is the history of the area you are operating in? Do your suppliers have interesting backgrounds? What about the food sourcing, the staff? Make that link to the world around you and you can create a sense of pride and belonging for your guests and staff. It is increasingly 'on trend' to source locally, promote wellbeing, preserve nature, be in touch with the local community. People and places are interesting; all the more so when guests were not particularly expecting any stories.

The language you use in communication is important. Cornell University's report How To Tell Your Hotel's Green Story give excellent guidance on how to identify the correct tone for each audience, depending on what you want to communicate and the outcome you are looking for.

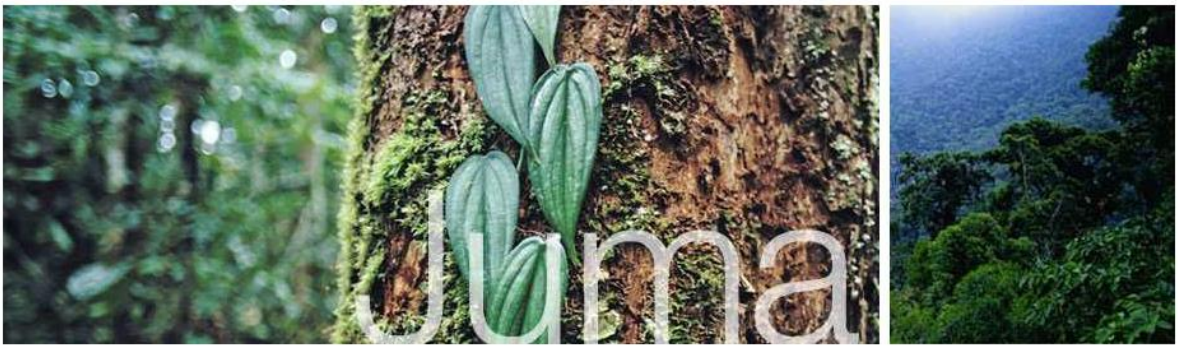
What to communicate?

Don't just list what you do. So you do stuff, so what? What difference does it make? Why should anyone care? Answering the 'so what' is key, in particular for the guests who care about these issues.

Environmental initiatives often just list details, but if you want to engage your guest, tell them what you are doing to reduce your impact and then invite them to help support that effort. Don't make the guest feel guilty or that all responsibility lies with them. This example from Marriott shows an honest, pragmatic and positive response to the issue of climate change through the support of its rainforest project in the Amazon.



Amazon Rainforest



Why Preserve the Rainforest?

Climate change — caused by carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gas emissions — threatens species, biodiversity and life on Earth as we know it. According to Conservation International and other environmental experts, the destruction of tropical forests contributes 20% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions and fuels climate change. But conserving forests — the lungs of the Earth — is one of the most important things we can do to improve the climate.

Marriott has taken steps to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions through Spirit To Preserve, its environmental strategy. To help offset its remaining carbon footprint, Marriott has committed $2 million to help protect the Juma rainforest reserve in the State of Amazonas, Brazil.

Related Links

Amazon Rainforest Video
Amazon Rainforest
Fact Sheet
List of Partners

If communicating about your carbon footprint, or other figures, 31kg CO2e means nothing to most people. We love this communication from Westin where guests can really appreciate the difference they and the hotel are making. It also shows you have done your homework and know what you are talking about.

Make it visual or relate it to something tangible, e.g. the equivalent number of trees planted, the number of cars taken off the road, 5 Olympic-sized swimming pools, etc.

Source: ***Carbon Visuals***

And always remember that if you want to be credible, **no numbers without stories, no stories without numbers…**

Social initiatives are often of great interest to guests. Make it firstly about what is directly relevant to your business. How do you look after your staff and suppliers? What about supporting the local community? It feels good to be part of something that does good and gives back. Most guests associate with charitable support as it is often something they do themselves so don't miss the opportunity to let them know about your staff volunteering and fundraising.

Where is the best place to communicate?

You need to place your messages where the people you are wanting to engage are most likely to read them and remember to use several of these media to tell your stories.

Corporate customers will most likely request the information directly, but it may be worth writing directly to your regular and potential customers to tell them about your activities. It may give you the edge over other properties in the area. Before writing, look at the issues corporates are prioritising. If a company has a focus on water reduction or the living wage, for example, it is good to be able to state how you may be able to help them achieve these objectives.

With **guests** in general, there are many opportunities. Here are some options to consider;

Your website

It is certainly worth creating a separate page detailing all your social and environmental activities in one place but make the most of other opportunities to highlight how these contribute to a better stay, such as your local sourcing of food, your use of natural materials and environmentally-friendly cleaning products which create better indoor air quality and beautiful décor. Keep the pages fresh with blogs and news stories to generate interest.

Certification and awards are great to highlight prominently on your home page as these can often act as a quality label and can help you get listed on sites such as bookdifferent.com and responsibletravel.com TripAdvisor GreenLeaders.

Testimonials can be great sellers as people are more likely to trust other guests' opinion, rather than your own, so consider adding some to your most visited pages.

Social media

Never underestimate the power of social media – Facebook and Twitter. This is one of the easiest places to tell your story and highlight news and little details about your initiatives on a much more regular basis than elsewhere, such as staff fundraising initiatives and new eco-friendly products. Social media can help guests get interested in their stay and encourage them to come back, and they can engage with you and tell others. IHG's Planet CR is a great example of this and Cape Town's Hotel Verde creates a great feeling about the hotel through its quirky Tweets and You Tube videos of what looks like a very happy workforce!

Booking confirmations

You can easily add in information to your booking confirmation to interest and engage guests, such as advising them the carbon footprint of an overnight stay and a link for them to offset that, or points that will get guests looking forward to their stay, such as "did you know that we offer bicycle hire to explore the local area / our breakfast menu is all locally sourced / we think you'll like our fresh water pool"

Entrance and lobby

Display any certificates, awards or certifications outside in order to be visible to passers-by, or prominently at the reception.

Room signs

Linen change options are the one thing guests usually see, and often the one thing everyone talks about when thinking of sustainability and hotels. We've put information on those in the Appendix as, though we have some good advice on the matter, it's time we all moved on. Towels are old' hat'!

Other options can be to encourage guests to turn lights and appliances off when they leave the room. We love this sign on the keycard fob in the Regal i-club Hong Kong, right by the door as guests leave the room. No nagging or preaching, the message raises a smile and is spot on.

You can also get a win-win if you make it in the guest's interest to do the right thing. Why not advise them the best temperature for a good night's sleep (it's around 65F / 18C[1]) so they don't set the temperature at an energy guzzling high or low (and wake up unrested).

Room signs need not just be about environmental stuff. The Statler Hotel at Cornell has cards with pictures and stories about hotel staff, many of whom are students at the university. This is a wonderful way to show how you value your people. A hotel that shows it values its people is likely to value quality, service and guest satisfaction. All very good messages to engage the guest.

And what pictures do you have in your rooms and public areas? Generic stuff or something from a local artist or pictures of the local area – current and historic? Part of sustainability communication is about creating a sense of place and this can be achieved in many ways.

Remember that even the most engaged guest could get overloaded with messages so don't overdo it! Choose the messages that you think are most important and relevant to your guests.

Guest information books

You should always use the in-room guest information book to get messages across. Create a specific page to demonstrate that sustainability is important to you but also use other pages to highlight specific initiatives, for example tell guests about your sustainable and local food sourcing policy in the food and beverage section, indicating any meals which use these products, e.g. sustainable fish or locally sourced fruit. If you have a section on excursions, highlight any which specifically benefit local people or the environment. Also highlight any staff initiatives which shows you have a valued and dedicated workforce. All this helps create a very personal experience in your property and a rich experience for the guest.

[1] http://sleepfoundation.org/bedroom/touch.php

If some of your initiatives are back of house, this is a good place to tell the guest about them.

TV channel

Similar to the information book, use your hotel's home and information pages to highlight the good stuff you are doing.

Restaurant & F&B

If you source from local suppliers or have policies for purchasing sustainable products, e.g. if your coffee and tea are fair trade, your eggs free-range, tell guests! Put it in the menu or on tent cards in serving areas. The way to a guest's heart can be through their stomach as, whether or not guests are particularly interested in social and environmental initiatives, most people like food and care about what they eat. Create more of an experience around the food and guests generally feel good. Wherever your hotel is in the world, this is something you can do. You can also encourage guests to waste less food by using messages in the menu, buffet signs and on tent cards. See great examples from WRAP in the Love Food Hate Waste Resource Pack

Source: WRAP

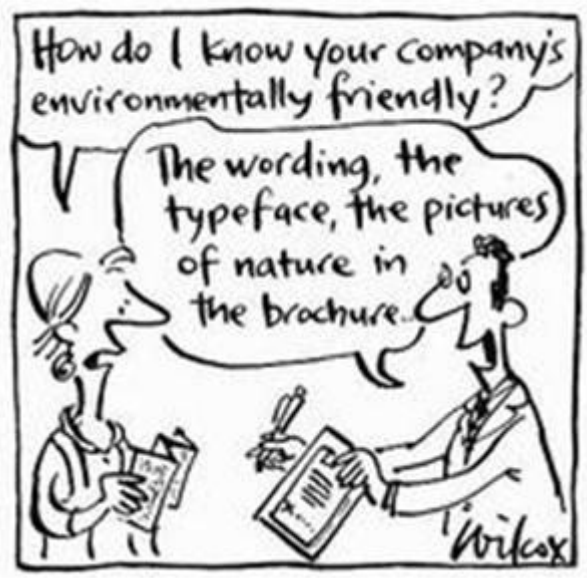
Talk to your guests

We don't want you to sit guests down to a lecture or briefing, but do mention things that might interest them when you get the chance. Lure them into the restaurant by telling them about your local dishes (and excellent chef!), tell them about any awards you've won, point out any features in the room that help them reduce their environmental impact without them having to try too hard, such as motion sensors and key cards.

Communicating in the press

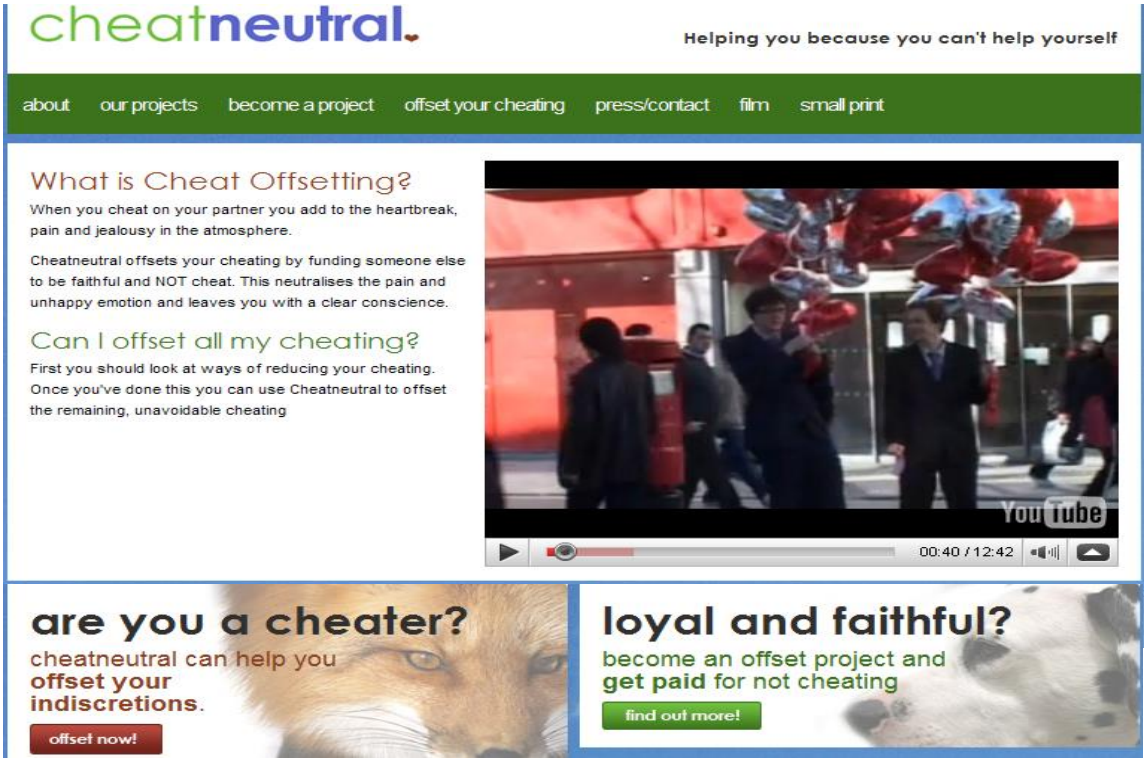
Your sustainability initiatives can get you good PR coverage but you need to be a bit different to generate interest. Sustainability targets are unlikely to get you noticed unless they are ambitious or have an interesting angle, such as to go 100% renewable or using a new technology. People stories or those about your community outreach are likely to resonate more with what can be a cynical press. Local press can be a better option than national press and you can show how you contribute and offer great service to the local community and visitors. Of course Green Hotelier is always keen to share interesting case studies so take a look at our Guidelines for Contributing. Often events, such as World Travel Market World Responsible Tourism Day, have a blog which highlights best practice from hotels so look out for these opportunities.

A note on 'greenwash'



Greenwash is making misleading environmental claims which are not backed up by fact. Avoid generalisations like 'we are a green / eco hotel'. What does green or eco mean? What evidence do you have to back up such a claim? Communicating in such a vague way can lead to accusations of 'greenwash'. Equally, if saying you are reducing your water / energy / waste by 20%... compared to what? Make sure you share enough facts to be credible.

Use realistic & simple language. Remember, you are not saving the environment / planet / Mother Earth. You are just doing a little less bad. This kind of language can appear overly emotive and unrealistic to many.



In short, communicating sustainability is communicating how you enhance people, the planet and the guest experience. Tell your story with focus, relevance, honesty and passion, otherwise why should they care? Make sure you answer the 'so what?'

Further reading

These are the best resources we've found to help hotels effectively communicate carbon;

Telling your Hotel's Green Story. Cornell 2011. https://www.hotelschool.cornell.edu/research/chr/pubs/tools/tooldetails-16121.html

The Greenwash Guide. Futerra 2008. http://www.futerra.co.uk/story/the-greenwash-guide-3#go=the-greenwash-guide-3-3822

Carbon Clear's 10 Step Guide to Effective Carbon Communications 2011. http://www.carbon-clear.com/resource/white-papers/carbon-clears-10-step-guide-to-effective-carbon-communications/P10/P10

Environmental claims and labels: guidance for businesses. Defra 2011.
Advice to business for clear, accurate, relevant and substantiated environmental claims on products, services or in marketing and advertising https://www.gov.uk/environmental-claims-and-labels-guidance-for-businesses

PAS2060 Specification for the demonstration of carbon neutrality. BSI 2010.
http://www.bsigroup.co.uk/en-GB/PAS-2060-Carbon-Neutrality/

"Communicating Sustainability: How to produce effective public campaigns (UNEP & Futerra 2005) Available in English, French and Spanish.

Engaging employees http://www.greenhotelier.org/our-themes/community-communication-engagement/engaging-employees/

Communicating with employees http://www.greenhotelier.org/our-themes/community-communication-engagement/communicating-with-your-employees/

Respondeco – great info from responsible tourism communications consultancy
http://www.responsibletourismcommunication.com/

Jeremy Smith – great blogs on communicating sustainability
http://jmcsmith.co.uk/

Carbon Visuals – service that creates bespoke images to communicate environmental impacts and reductions http://www.carbonvisuals.com/

APPENDIX **Linen changes**

Communications regarding linen changes warrant their own section! The signs in the bedroom and bathroom requesting that guests don't change their linens every day is often the only place people see an environmental message and is the thing everyone talks about. Guests can be cynical that the hotel is only interested in saving money, or are discouraged because they follow the instructions and their linens get changed anyway. It is essential to train and retrain, encourage, reward and correct staff to follow any system you introduce or any message will fail and potentially irritate guests.

Towel reuse options are important but not very interesting. They are not what the guest came to your hotel for, nor will they make their stay any more enjoyable, so make sure your main messages to guests are about other things. You should have a linen change programme and you should communicate it, so here are a few ideas on how...

You need to consider the culture of where you are operating and that of your guests but Saving Mother Earth / the planet is unlikely to resonate with many guests. It is too dramatic and simply untrue. Save the environment? Well, you're not really doing that, are you.

Messages that resonate better are;

1) Basic facts

Water is scarce in many parts of the world but guests can't be expected to know that. Telling them in simple and straightforward terms will inform them without giving them a lecture or making them feel guilty. There is a good reason why you are asking them to support your efforts. For example, "Did you know it takes x gallons of water to wash five towels?" Something that shows why doing so makes a difference

2) 8 out of 10 cats…

When Whiskas cat food was marketed in the UK with the line that "8 out of 10 cats preferred Whiskas", sales soared as people did not want to be in the minority. It's the same with linen changes. Many hotels have found their linen change options are better supported when the message is "we find that most of our guests are happy to change their linens less frequently…." As guests want to feel that they are doing the same as others

3) Incentivising guests

Many Starwood properties offer guests who opt out of housekeeping extra reward points or money off food and beverage purchases. Accor plants trees for every 5 towels not changed, and Rezidor contributes to the charity Just a Drop.

These systems have many benefits and they work; guests have a real incentive to reduce linen changes as something good will be gained from their decision, and that makes them feel good and far more likely to buy in. Also staff have an incentive to support the system as there is a rationale for it and guests are more likely to be angry if it is not followed.

Involve your guests

Some hotels get guests actively involved in more than just linen change options. For example, many hotels participate in Earth Hour each year and turn their lights off or down for an hour and host romantic candle-lit evenings or discos in the dark to create a unique event and share an important message. Others give guests the opportunity to join in an event, such as Rezidor's Walk for Water day where hotels will invite guests to walk for roughly 35 feet/10 metres carrying 'jerry cans' full of water to illustrate the daily struggle millions of people around the globe face in their efforts to

access safe drinking water. For every 330 feet/100 metres walked, Radisson Blu will donate the funds to provide one child with safe drinking water for life through the charity Just a Drop. Beach clean ups, 3 minute shower challenges, sponsoring staff fund raising activities, World Environment Day…there are so many opportunities to create fun activities which may also be great selling points to stay in your property.

How will you monitor your success?

Monitoring the success of a sustainability communications plan is not easy but it can be done. First of all, make sure you are measuring and reporting on your initiatives and have set a baseline so you can say what has been achieved within a certain timescale. If you don't do this, you will not have the right information to communicate in the first place. Sustainability has to be part of your business model; it can't just be used for marketing. If you try to use it as such, your messages will be hollow and people will see through them.

Ask your guests for feedback after their stay, either by questionnaires in the room, at check-out or by email. What initiatives were they made aware of? What did they like? What suggestions do they have?

Also talk to your staff. Engage them in supporting initiatives and get them to feed back.