



CSR, ESG AND SUSTAINABILITY COMMUNICATIONS

**How visual storytelling can accelerate sustainability
progress and build trust with stakeholders**

INTRODUCTION

Stories about sustainability, ESG and CSR have the potential to directly influence brand reputation, build trust and loyalty, encourage innovation both internally and within the supply chain, and change behaviour and attitudes across a wide range of stakeholders.

Authentic photography can play a crucial role by providing visual evidence of sustainability initiatives, and helping organisations to accelerate progress towards their objectives.

Clarity works with clients to create visual stories of the CSR, ESG or sustainability journey that will resonate with stakeholders, both internal and external.

Internally, stories generate a sense of pride and purpose, and can motivate change.

Externally, stories build trust and brand loyalty among customers, investors and other stakeholders.

Of course, we write as well but we use a reportage style approach to photography that enhances the text and strikes the perfect balance between promotional storytelling and accountability.

We were first asked to help develop the communication and engagement plan for a major UK retailer in 2008 as they launched their sustainability action plan, which included carbon reduction, recycling,



water, plastics reduction, and ethical sourcing.

We quickly realised that this was more than just a few changes to procurement; success required changes in behaviour and mindset, both internally and across thousands of suppliers, and we knew that the most effective route to change is storytelling.

This short book, designed to be read in 10 minutes, is based on our experience of telling visual stories for over 25 years and being involved with the sustainability agenda for over 15 years.

IT'S ALL WORDS

Circular economy, ecosystem services, triple bottom line, MSHT, SDGs, and a host of other acronyms and impenetrable phrases are all part of the sustainability lexicon. When we were asked to engage a group of construction project managers on the issue of biodiversity loss we suspected they would have no idea what we were talking about. We were right but then we showed some photographs of trees, birds and lost habitats and the images were immediately recognisable and resonated.

We regularly review the sustainability reports for companies in the FTSE 100 and Fortune 500 and found most describe their progress towards their goals in text only. Some include graphical charts and tables. Most use images from online photographic libraries (sometimes the same ones). Just a few include original photography, and none used storytelling frameworks

A research paper published by the Nielsen Norman Group titled, How People Read Online, found that where images were included with text the viewer moved from image to text to image to text and so on, in what they described as a lawn mower pattern. They stated that:



People still primarily scan, rather than read. Scanning all of the text on a page, or even a majority, is still extremely rare. Even when users do scan content in its entirety, they never scan it perfectly linearly. They still jump around pages, skipping some content, backtracking to scan what they skipped, and rescanning content they've already scanned.



THE PICTURE SUPERIORITY EFFECT



The same research group have also stated that *'Pictures can communicate concepts better than words alone, partly because people tend to remember information better when presented visually. This is known as the picture-superiority effect.'*

This is supported by an MIT study that found that people can identify an image in just 13 milliseconds, interpreting whole visual narratives in seconds, whereas most people read about three words per second, meaning that it has probably taken you about 25 seconds to read this paragraph.

A single image is not a story. A story requires context, some action and a resolution - just like in the movies.

Most organisations communicate just the action - *here's what we've done* - they don't explain why they did it or the impact their actions had.

When we think about stories, we are all familiar with the concept of chapters creating a narrative arc – the beginning, middle and end. Which suggests that at least three images (chapters) would be required to convey the same sort of narrative visually.

If we think about a story related to CSR or sustainability we might break down a typical visual story into four chapters.

1. The sustainability challenge(s) being addressed and why
2. How the goal or challenge(s) relates to the organisation
3. What the organisation is doing and the actions they are taking
4. The impact that the initiatives are having either environmentally or socially

In photography, much like films, we have conventions for building a coherent narrative, which include establishing shots, close-ups/detail, action, environmental portraits, and portraits. Using these conventions we create photo stories or photo essays.

A typical visual narrative as described might include:

- An establishing wide shot that locates the issue or challenge
- Environmental portraits or action shots that provide more detail about the issue or challenge
- A detail shot that visually links the organisation and the sustainability challenge
- The initiatives themselves, which might require two or three shots to convey
- Portraits or other relevant shots that capture the positive impact of the initiative and progress being made



We can see from these photos that providing access to water enables these children to clean their clothes. It's not the whole story because we don't know who installed the taps or why.

WHY VISUAL STORIES ARE MORE EFFECTIVE

The power of an image to stimulate the imagination so that the eye and brain read a story from what can be seen has been used to inform, motivate, and educate for thousands of years.

When we use text alone to communicate it is easier to be understood if the person reading is familiar with the same language. Therefore, written language has created a divide between those people who do and don't use the same language.



Whereas imagery is a universal language, it is truly inclusive, and we can read the meaning of an image in seconds that would otherwise require thousands of words in multiple languages to convey.

Images are not just more effective; they are a more efficient way of communicating and telling stories.

We will inevitably interpret some visuals with a personal bias or belief, that is why we need to follow storytelling frameworks.

For example, a person drinking water from a plastic bottle might be interpreted as someone who is thirsty or someone who is contributing to the issue of plastic pollution. In this case our story needs more context, meaning more than one image, to help us understand the story more clearly.

That is also why the single image is rarely the complete story.



FORCE FOR GOOD

Today, we hold companies to account in ways that were simply not possible 20 years ago. Technology has made the world smaller and research easier. Social media has meant that consumers can also be journalists and critics. Stakeholders can be activists and fund managers can be influenced by individual investors if they form themselves into a movement. It only requires 100,000 signatures to get a topic raised and discussed in the UK's House of Commons. It has never been easier to demonstrate displeasure with an organisation and calling to question its ethics, values and reputation.

At a time when such risks are a very real threat, storytelling is essential, not just to manage reputation but also to drive change throughout the organisation. A survey of UK businesses in 2023 found that 20% had so little information about their sustainability initiatives that they admitted to publicly exaggerating progress, *'A further one in four executives admit they do not know if their sustainability efforts are making any positive difference at all'*.

Possibly because they aren't telling stories and celebrating the work they are doing?





A Harvard Business article described one of the enemies of achieving sustainability as 'Culture and Leadership' stating that:

Building on the same theme an MIT Sloan Management Review article in 2023, titled Sustainability Progress has Stalled at Most Companies, identified a number of areas that companies needed to address including culture:



Established firms, founded in the 20th century, were simply not designed for sustainability, and consequently they have not developed a culture of sustainability.

Changing people's hearts and minds is the biggest challenge.



Our research has identified the lack of a sustainability culture as one of the biggest impediments to progress.'

'Communicating sustainability progress to employees is a key component of a sustainability culture, because it keeps issues top of mind. Celebrating successes will pique employee interest and legitimize the importance of sustainability to the organisation.'



SUMMARY

- Efforts to deliver against CSR, ESG and sustainability goals are stalling for a large percentage of businesses
- Sustainability is mainly being communicated using text, which research shows is unlikely to engage audiences
- Achieving success with sustainability initiatives requires cultural and behavioural change - it is essentially a change program
- The most effective communications are stories that are image-led with supporting text
- Visual stories are universal and can be understood in a fraction of the time it takes to read, watch or listen
- Therefore, you should be making use of visual storytelling to support progress towards CSR, ESG and sustainability goals



ABOUT CLARITY AND ANDREW CAMERON

I started created visual stories for businesses in 1994. I started my own agency, Clarity, in 2000 specialising in visual communication to support change narratives.

I have worked with organisations on sustainability stories since 2006.

I have studied Environmental Science and Sustainability Management at Cambridge University's CISL.

Today, I use my skills as a writer and photographer to help clients get their stories across.

To find out more visit: www.andrew-cameron.com

To start a conversation drop me a line or give me a call:

ac@andrew-cameron.com

+44 7884 185649

