



The UN Sustainable Development Goals and your business. Who to talk to about them and how..

The UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) had an underwhelming first year. Their launch was overshadowed by the Paris Climate Change agreement while its solidarity message was trampled by the four horsemen of Brexit, Trump, terrorism and Syria. Factors that might explain why a recent survey of US corporates revealed only 37% were planning to engage with the SDGs at all.

This will be a disappointment for the UN who are desperate to promote business's role in implementing the goals. Reams of guidance have been created to this effect - from the SDG Compass with its free inventory of 'alignment tools' to GlobalGiving's helpful list of vetted non-profits in need of corporate support.

An examination of these tools reveals the problem however. These tools (like the goals) are aimed at those that already buy into the sustainability ethos and won't be put off by language that is at best worthy and bureaucratic, and at worst downright suffocating. This is a shame. For the goals to have any chance of success, they must reach beyond sustainability's dedicated but miniscule inner circle to embrace the mainstream.

Businesses don't just carry the responsibility to achieve this, but the tools to do so. Here's where they should start.

1. Who: The Workforce

The most obvious, immediate and indeed necessary way for the SDGs to achieve awareness at scale is for businesses to communicate them to their employees. They have the advantage of extensive internal comms mechanisms and a captive audience.

For them to resonate, however, the process cannot be one of simple top-down communication, but genuine long-term engagement. The number and type of goals makes this easier in that they enable employees across the business to apply them to their own day-to-day activities - not as a collective, but one mind at a time – from designers or on the shop floor.

How: An increasingly common strategy for embedding sustainability is the creation of green champions or ambassadors. Marks & Spencer has sustainability champions in each of its 1,380 stores while Bloomberg's BCAUSE program involves employees' families to increase impact.

2. Who: Operations

Data will play a key role in management of the goals over its 15 years – for the benchmarking, analysis and comparison that will inform decision-making. The private sector is already collaborating alongside civil society and government to generate comparable statistics required to demonstrate both scale and progress,

Companies should look beyond big data analytics and the global vision, however. Smaller data collection should be exploited to identify gaps, tell a more intimate story about a company's efforts and so engage the workforce, local community and other stakeholders.

How: Alongside conventional data tracking methods, companies should harness informal data collection by employees to fill knowledge gaps. There is a growing number of smartphone apps available to this effect – from reporting on health and safety incidents to spotting missed energy and supply chain efficiency opportunities.

3. Who: Supply chain

The FTSE 100 high profile brands and businesses are the traditional standard bearers for sustainability. They have the budgets for in-house sustainability drivers, the economies of scale to make changes and the reporting requirements (and NGO scrutiny) to consider. Smaller business have generally been slower to act.



The SDGs provide an opportunity for larger businesses to spread the message downstream by encouraging their take-up among the businesses that supply to them. In fact, this is where the language, size and structure of the SDGs is an advantage. They have third party authority, universal application and can be tailored to individual relationships and businesses – from the fish in the canteen to the fuel in the lorries. By embracing their supply chain large businesses can impact on goals that might otherwise seem irrelevant to them.

How: The SDGs should be incorporated into supplier codes of conduct alongside applicable metrics, benchmarking and rewards. Where appropriate, larger businesses should even share resources (training, reporting methodologies) to facilitate supply chain engagement with, and adoption of, new behaviours. This could even be extended to include competitors to increase scale, raise standards and expose any back-markers.

4. Who: Marketing

The SDGs shine a light once again on the challenge of how to convert ethical concerns amongst consumers into buying behaviour – but don't solve it. Indeed the formal language of the SDGs is a massive turn-off for marketers, as are even their 17 brightly coloured icons.

The answer is that they don't have to – and shouldn't be made to. Making the SDGs work means understanding their limitations as much as their strengths. Companies that wish to showcase the ethical credentials of their brands need to be able to do so with the same manner that they would demonstrate other product characteristics. Immediate, memorably and emotively. They may adhere to the SDGs' objectives, but not necessarily their language.

How: Businesses should follow the example of Kenko who memorably condensed their role in meeting at least 3 SDGs under one, simple campaign-leading, consumer friendly slogan: Coffee vs Gangs.

5. Who: The Board

An objective of the SDGs was that they should be used as a framework not a checklist. In other words, it is not enough for companies to focus only on those that apply to their immediate footprint (e.g. SDG 2 Food & Agriculture or SDG 3 Health & Wellbeing), but for all businesses to examine all goals – and find themselves a role in each one.

This will require the buy-in from not just the usual suspects within a firm (supply chain, communications) but engagement 'across the board', even and including departments where the SDGs might raise uncomfortable questions about company practises, including its tax affairs (CFO, General Council) and workplace equality (Human Resources) and to unite the various strands listed above - the company leadership (CEO).

How: Company annual reports might follow the recommendations of the UK Parliament's Development Committee who called on every government department (i.e. not just DIFID) to include the SDGs in their Single Departmental Plan - with specific references to relevant SDGs by number.