

## » Communicating Sustainability: The Food Industry's Big Challenge

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1, 2, 3, 6, 12, 13, 15 and 17. Understanding the rationale of this numerical series could take time you would probably prefer spending doing something else. That is why we are giving you the answer to this problem: the series has no logical pattern. It does, however, refer to some of the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs) that directly follow the United Nations' strategic plan for promoting sustainable agriculture. If we also consider the indirect goals involved, it becomes a transversal issue that affects everyone.

### AN ONGOING CHALLENGE

Since the beginning of time, humans have faced the same challenges of obtaining and producing food, with agriculture more or less at its core; but the nature of this goal has experienced constant evolution. Similarly, the way we eat and the diets we follow are subject to these changes, and each new step is, in some ways, only temporary. And companies must lead in this area.



Once food moves beyond being a concern essentially related to the satisfaction of base physiological needs linked purely to survival and safety—once these aspects are guaranteed—people begin to worry about how their food is produced. Questions such as quality, environmental commitment, animal welfare and nutritional balance, etc. become key aspects that influence consumer decision-making when it comes to choosing what goes into their shopping baskets. In this era, the value chain's sustainability also comes into play. All this is reflected in the UN SDGs, and it all impacts communications.

The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) predicted back in 2009<sup>1</sup> that, by 2050, the world population would have increased by a third, but cropland would grow at a much slower rate. This means it is necessary to develop production models that will allow us to meet the demand for food while simultaneously guaranteeing sustainability.

Companies, governments and institutions of all kinds are already working intensely to rise to these challenges, and the key to overcoming them successfully is sustainability, though it is possible many consumers may not yet be aware of either the problem or its solution.

This is the challenge facing the business sector; Not only must they communicate and disseminate information on these problems, but they must also find a solution.

<sup>1</sup>High-Level Experts Meeting. *How to Feed the World in 2050: World Agriculture and Perspectives on 2050*. [http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/wsfs/docs/Issues\\_papers/Issues\\_papers\\_SP/La\\_agricultura\\_mundial.pdf](http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/wsfs/docs/Issues_papers/Issues_papers_SP/La_agricultura_mundial.pdf)

## COMMUNICATING SUSTAINABILITY: A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

According to the FAO<sup>2</sup>, “to be sustainable, agriculture must meet the needs of present and future generations in its products and services, while ensuring profitability, environmental health and social and economic equity.” Sustainable agriculture must guarantee global food security, while simultaneously promoting healthy ecosystems and supporting the sustainable management of land, water and natural resources.

Those involved in food chain production and distribution already know sustainability is not only essential for the sector’s long-term health, but is also a strong differentiating value. Aside from being able to expand production over time, sustainability is now a competitive advantage for building a reputation—once consumers can see the food is being produced sustainably.

When sustainability guides food production, and when the companies involved are capable of communicating this adequately, it becomes a strong reputational advantage, where “reputation” is the set of shared beliefs in a company’s relevant communities, contributing either positively or negatively to said company’s results. It is also capable of positively influencing the five variables that comprise reputation according to the Reputation Relevance<sup>3</sup> model: contribution, integrity, transparency, credibility and image.

There is no better way to illustrate this than with an example. Agricultural models differ in their processes, as can be with conventional versus organic agriculture. These can be complementary or merely coexist with one another. However, the principles governing sustainability must be applied in the same way, and must be assessed through key performance indicators (KPIs). These

“Sustainability is not only essential for the maintenance of its activity, but it also becomes a differential value”

measure appropriate resource management per unit of production, as the final products are what society demands and consumes.

Without further quantifying the indicators in each agricultural production model, we can comfortably state the organic model has worked better in the area of belief and reputation, occupying a space in consumers’ minds that links them to the values of sustainability.

From a nutritional perspective, there is no evidence of any difference in nutrient quality between organically and conventionally produced food. The small differences in nutrient content detected are biologically plausible and relate mainly to differences in the method of production.<sup>4</sup>

Despite this, organic agriculture has generated shared beliefs regarding its links to sustainable food production on a greater scale than other models. According to a survey carried out by the Sustainable Agriculture Technology Platform<sup>5</sup>, the organic production model is perceived as more sustainable and a smaller-scale consumer of natural resources.

However, there are other agricultural production models that are complementary and respond to different, although related, needs, such **Conservation Agriculture**.<sup>6</sup>

**The objectives** in this model are essentially **geared toward sustainability and, beyond that, the mitigation and adaptation of agriculture in response to climate change**.<sup>7</sup>

Conservation agriculture is almost unknown among consumers; Therefore, it has an opportunity to occupy a new space related to sustainability, one that generates value by leveraging the reputations of all its production and distribution chain’s actors.

<sup>2</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. *Sustainable Agriculture*. <http://www.fao.org/sustainable-development-goals/overview/fao-and-the-post-2015-development-agenda/sustainable-agriculture/en/>

<sup>3</sup> LLORENTE & CUENCA. *Great Acceptance of Reputation Relevance*. <http://www.comunicacionyreputacion.com/gran-acogida-de-reputacion-relevance/>

<sup>4</sup> *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* “Nutritional quality of organic foods: a systematic review.” <http://ajcn.nutrition.org/content/90/3/680.full>

<sup>5</sup> Plataforma Tecnológica de Agricultura Sostenible. <http://www.agriculturasostenible.org>

<sup>6</sup> Asociación Española de Agricultura de Conservación Suelos Vivos. *Fundamentos de la AC*. <http://www.agriculturadeconservacion.org/index.php/agricultura-de-conservacion/fundamentos-de-la-ac>

<sup>7</sup> Asociación Española de Agricultura de Conservación Suelos Vivos. *Beneficios de la Agricultura de Conservación en un Entorno de Cambio Climático*. [http://www.agriculturadeconservacion.org/Estudio\\_AEAC.pdf](http://www.agriculturadeconservacion.org/Estudio_AEAC.pdf)

## HOW DO SUSTAINABLE COMPANIES ACT?

There are many reasons a company may differentiate itself in terms of sustainability efforts, but there are three with a fundamental role in the immediate future: alliances, sustainable innovation and communication.

**1 Forming Alliances.** Companies, now more than ever, are mobilizing to incorporate sustainability into their work models, based on a fundamental maxim: **generating development and revenue without compromising future generations.** However, this premise, which requires us to transform a sector as important as agriculture, cannot be accomplished if it is not a collaboration of three large groups:

- Companies, as drivers of real change and sustainability.
- The scientific community, including universities, social and environmental organizations, as key agents in the development of innovation.
- The government, through policies that favor sustainable growth and campaigns to raise awareness among citizens.

We are talking about multisector alliances whose ultimate purpose is to resolve a systemic problem—that is to say, one that affects us all. But in order to function correctly, they must fully adapt traditional models—or create new ones—based on the following premises:

- **Trust.** This is the starting point before beginning any initiative.
- **Long-term vision.** Change will not happen in such a well-established sector overnight, despite the race against time imposed by climate change. Implementing innovation requires testing and learning processes, as well as time to permeate society and the industry.
- **Collaboration, not competition.** This model is completely different from the traditional one, requiring a difficult change in mentality and demanding great effort. It will affect the way companies in the same sector relate and change how we present ourselves to the world, as well as, of course, fostering challenging new ideas of and results—not to mention the concept of reward.

This working model, which may at first appear utopian, has been implemented in the agriculture sector for years. This is why companies that want to stay in the market must work to meet the great challenges arising from the international community to guarantee their own sustainability. There is no other business roadmap available.

**2 Sustainable innovation in the most traditional sector.** Another line of work will be sustainable innovation. Requiring that the entire value chain develop projects and products with the capacity to transform, will, very soon, be one of the most useful ways to respond to one of the biggest global challenges.

Some companies have already begun to develop this type of practice through initiatives like:

- **Treatment and reuse of waste water for cultivation and fostering biodiversity (green filters).**
- **Agricultural systems that use cultivation lands as storage to capture CO<sub>2</sub>.**
- **Farming that uses crop pollination, thus guaranteeing the protection of sustainable beekeeping.**
- **Tools that seek to sustainably manage resources through smart apps.**

**3 Communication.** In light of this, a sector so complex and ubiquitous must of course prioritize communication with its consumers. Explaining and demonstrating will be key elements to consider for companies in the agricultural and food sectors to successfully share their differentiators and ensure their role in promoting sustainability for resources, the planet and life.

The challenge is on the table. The measures are many, and communication is the best way to transform a model that has remained essentially unchanged for centuries.



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