

# SUSTAINABILITY AND ADVERTISING

Friends or foes?

September 2022

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## WHETHER WE WANT IT OR NOT, THE SUSTAINABILITY CHALLENGE IS TAKING UP MORE AND MORE SPACE IN OUR LIVES, AND IN THE MEDIA

From the IPCC<sup>1</sup> reports alarming us about climate change and the yearly COPs and the worldwide protests they trigger, to activist groups like Extinction Rebellion and their civil disobedience and non-violent actions, sustainability has become a frequent topic in the media. ‘Don’t Look Up’, a satire on the ignorance of climate change, was Netflix’s second most popular film debut when it came

out.<sup>2</sup> Beyond climate change and environmental challenges, the social dimension of sustainability is also centre stage, with one wave following another: the #MeToo movement and the fight for gender equality, #BlackLivesMatter and the fight for inclusion and diversity are just some of the most famous examples. Everywhere we look, it’s hard to avoid those questions around building a sustainable future.

## BRANDS OCCUPY A SINGULAR SPACE WHEN WE THINK OF SUSTAINABILITY

Brands have an important place in our lives, providing us with the products and services we need. Some of them are active leaders of the sustainability transformation, but a majority have been part of the problem of overconsumption and pollution. They share a commonality: they communicate with people through advertising, and thus we see more and more ads including some level of sustainability messaging within.

At first, there can be a cognitive dissonance when associating advertising and sustainability. Don’t they have irreconcilable objectives? Advertising’s purpose is to sell more, while sustainability aims at “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”<sup>3</sup>

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## HOW CAN THEY BOTH WORK TOGETHER? CAN ADVERTISING AND SUSTAINABILITY EVER BECOME FRIENDS TO SUPPORT A MORE SUSTAINABLE FUTURE AND RESPONSIBLE BRAND GROWTH?

At Ipsos we pre-test thousands of ads every year, so we reviewed our data to answer this question. We do see some brands being called out for greenwashing, but not in the majority of cases. 68% of people believe businesses that do not act now to combat climate change will be failing their employees and customers<sup>4</sup> : **people expect advertisers to act for sustainability.** The challenge for brands then resides in balancing the communication for a more sustainable future with the potential to grow sales and market share for the brand.

In this paper, we look at what we can learn from our experience evaluating ads with a sustainability message. What works, what doesn’t work? What are the key trends and tips we can find to help brands build better sustainability advertising?

We identified 200 ads in our global database that included some sustainability messaging, across a wide distribution of countries, categories, type and importance of sustainability claims. The two main areas of sustainability that are addressed in advertising are environmental and social claims. These ads were evaluated using our CreativeSpark assessment tool, which measures a combination of thoughts, feelings and emotions with sales and market share validated metrics to measure effects and identify areas to optimise, if needed.

In our analysis, we identified five key learnings that we believe can help brands successfully change people’s behaviour and create a more sustainable future, while also helping to grow their sales and market share.



# 1. TALKING ABOUT SUSTAINABILITY DOES NOT IMPROVE THE CHANCES OF MAKING ADVERTISING GROW YOUR BRAND

Simply adding a sustainability claim to your ads does not make them work better for your brand. From an overall effectiveness standpoint, ads with sustainability claims perform on par with ads without such claims. This suggests that brands cannot rely on the fact that they are talking about sustainability to be more effective. The ad needs to be executed in the right way.

This is even more apparent when we look at the components of overall effectiveness, where we see that **brand attention is 5% lower for ads with a sustainability claim.**

This is due to several factors, the main ones being:

- Sustainability messages tend to be generic, and difficult for a brand to own
- The right balance needs to be struck between sustainability messages and brand focus
- Multiplication of sustainability messages means it's harder to catch attention.

It's something we've seen before when a type of advertising becomes common: the sea of sameness – everyone talks about the same thing, making it harder to stand out.

# 2. STRIKE THE RIGHT BALANCE BETWEEN SUSTAINABILITY AND BRAND MESSAGING

In reviewing the ads, we see that the sustainability angle varies. Some ads focus solely on the sustainability claim, while others blend brand messages with sustainability. Ads that blend brand and sustainability messages perform much better, with an average increase of 54% on our overall performance index (Fig. 1). **This shows the importance of not forgetting to include brand benefit messages in your ads.**

We see this difference when looking at drivers of effectiveness as well. Ads that focus only on sustainability are less likely to convey a new message and lag on the entertainment factor (Fig 2).

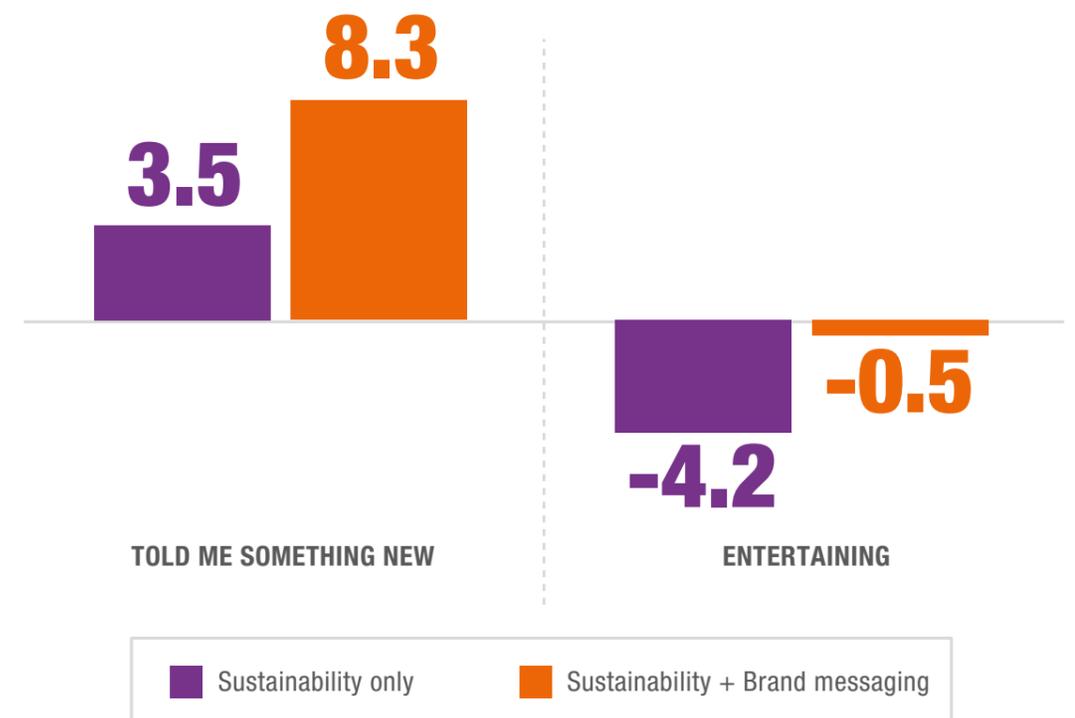
An excellent example of striking the right balance between brand and sustainability messaging is the Volvo ads on 'the ultimate safety test' which was reviewed in a previous Ipsos article.<sup>5</sup> This ad stayed true to Volvo's key self-proclaimed brand mission of keeping people safe, by showing the different types of safety tests they put their cars through. In the last scene, it takes an unexpected turn by showing a glacier's ice breaking down into the sea while the voiceover adds "climate change is the ultimate safety test, that's why we're changing to all-electric". By introducing the protection of the planet to increase people's safety in a surprising way, it does a great job at integrating Volvo's traditional brand messaging of safety with sustainability.

Figure 1 Creative effectiveness vs. norm



Source: Ipsos

Figure 2 Ad rating vs. norm



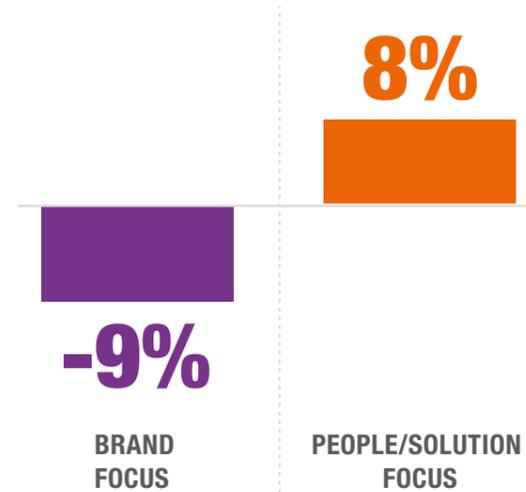
Source: Ipsos

### 3. PULL PEOPLE INTO A SUSTAINABLE BEHAVIOUR, DON'T PUSH THEM INTO IT

Another trend we observe regarding sustainability-related ads relates to the way the message is crafted. We see that ads that focus on people, talk about their problems, and offer them a solution are more effective than ads that just talk about the brand.

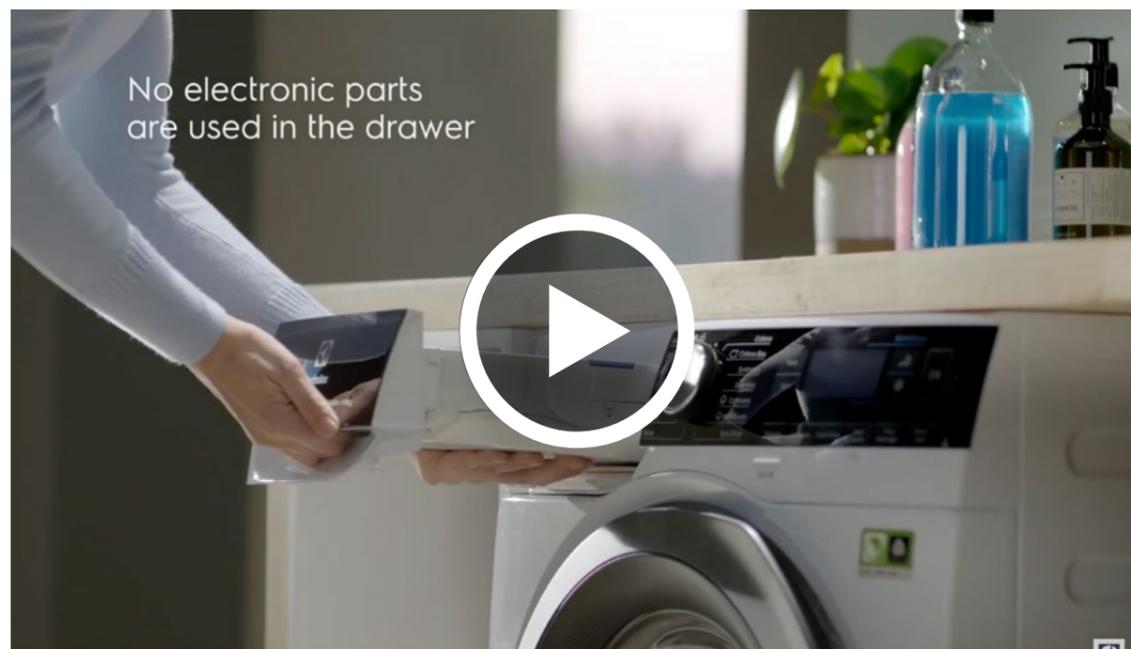
The solution could be simple and pragmatic too – such as the auto-dosing function of washing machines in an Electrolux ad, which automatically calculates and uses the correct dose of detergent needed for the laundry you've loaded into it, avoiding waste.

Figure 3 Creative effectiveness vs. norm



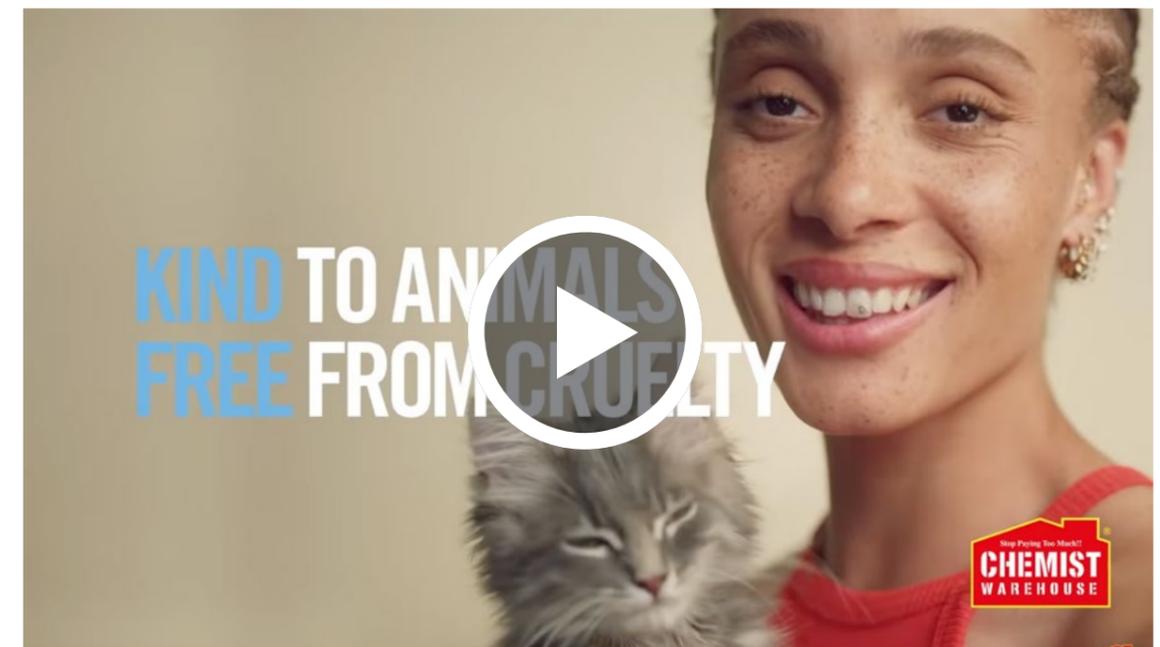
Source: Ipsos

Illustration 1 Electrolux 'AutoDose' advert



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X7NPV4guP8c>

Illustration 2 Rimmel 'Kind and Free' advert



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TmVAZ5rvBZ8>

The Rimmel 'Kind & Free' ad is another good example, presenting a make up range that is free from fragrance and animal testing, and so therefore kind to humans, animals and the planet.

As we learned in the recently published Ipsos book *'Misfits: How Creativity in Advertising Sparks Brand Growth'*,<sup>6</sup> **empathy** is one of the three pillars of creativity, alongside creative experiences and ideas. Empathy is also a key driver of advertising effectiveness; this holds true with sustainability advertising too. People like to be heard and like to be offered easy solutions: ads that convey this are demonstrating empathy. Putting people

at the core of your strategy and showing that you are taking the right steps to be part of the solution increases your relevance and creative performance.

What doesn't work as well are ads that focus on the brand or that ask people to do something like 'start recycling'. This could be compared to 'pull' vs. 'push' tactics. The first case offers you a solution, pulling you into a sustainable behaviour by making it easy for you. The latter case tries to push you to do something you may not have planned or wanted to. **Ads that use 'pull' tactics have an overall effectiveness of +19% on average**, driven by an increase of choice intent (Fig.3).

Another great example is the SodaStream ad that shows a forklift breaking through the wall of an apartment, carrying a pallet of bottled water. The voiceover narration asks “Tired of running out of sparkling water? Then get this counterbalance forklift. Or maybe there is a more ecological solution. In fact, with SodaStream you turn tap water into delicious sparkling water. And you say goodbye to plastic! SodaStream, better for you, better for the planet.”

The ad balances sustainability and brand messaging well, with the first part showing the overconsumption of plastic bottles and the second part using distinctive brand assets like the sound of the SodaStream machine and the bottle filling up with gas. It also offers people a simple solution to get carbonated water. This ad performed very well in our evaluation, with an entertaining theme and an informative and believable message driving a top tercile Creative Effect Index, our overall ad effectiveness metric (Fig. 4).

Illustration 3 SodaStream advert



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZVAugPPN2Qs>

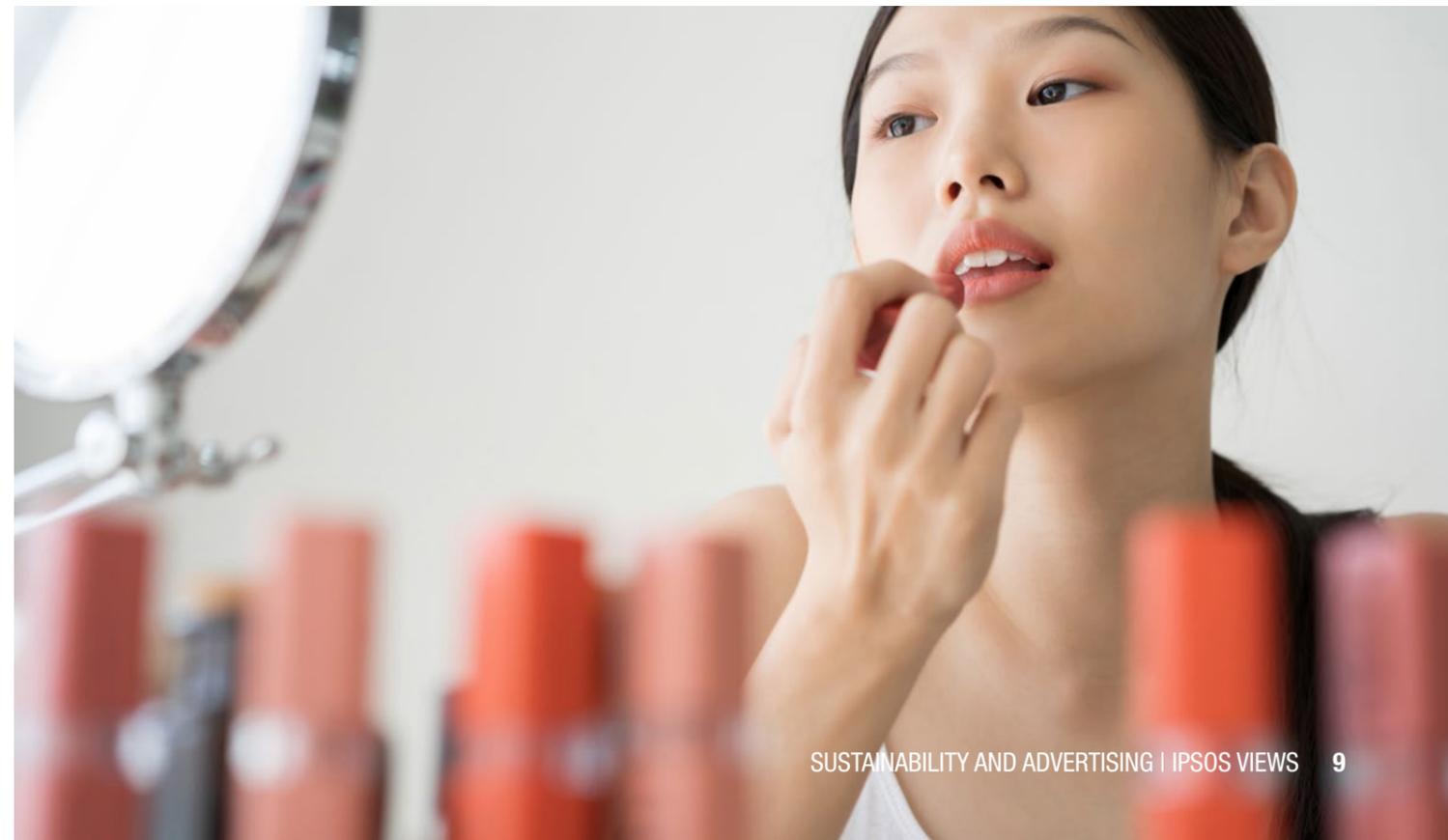
Figure 4 SodaStream Creative Effect Index



Source: Ipsos

Sustainability works in advertising only if consumers believe the brand is truly sustainable. Otherwise it can backlash against the brand. This means brands must first act sustainably across their value chain before using it in advertising.”

Einat Ben Horin, Head of Global Consumer Insights & Analytics, SodaStream

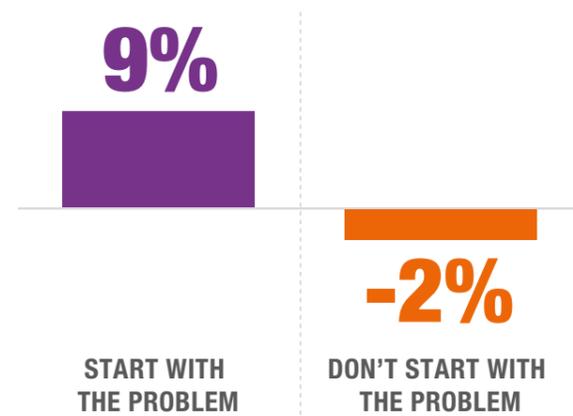


## 4. FACE THE ISSUES

We see a smaller number of ads that choose to start with the problem head on, usually as an introduction to the sustainability topic they are going to cover. This varies from showing images of the impact of climate change, to showing local businesses struggling or minorities facing discrimination. While the problem-solution set-up is quite traditional in advertising, the problems here are serious and may be perceived as generic. Does this kind of set-up work well when talking about sustainability and serious issues? The answer is yes, as we can see in the following data.

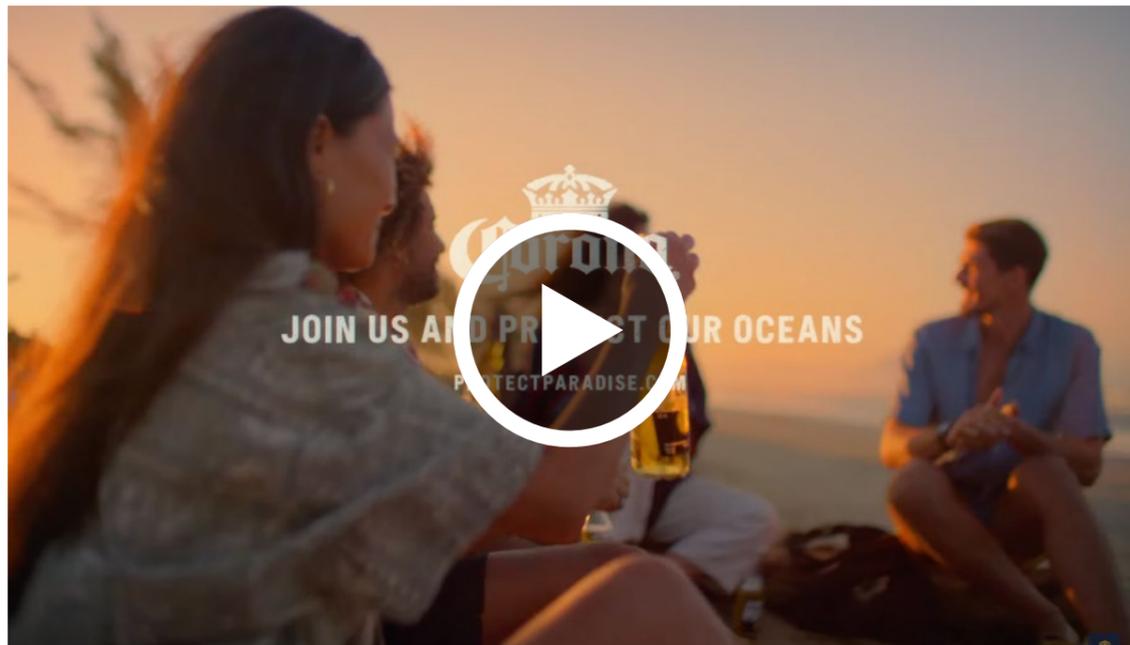
Overall, **ads that start with the problem outperform the other ads in terms of effectiveness (+11%)** (Fig. 5). Acknowledging the problem is probably a good start if you want to be part of the solution.

Figure 5 Creative effectiveness vs. norm



Source: Ipsos

Illustration 4 Corona '77 Earths' advert



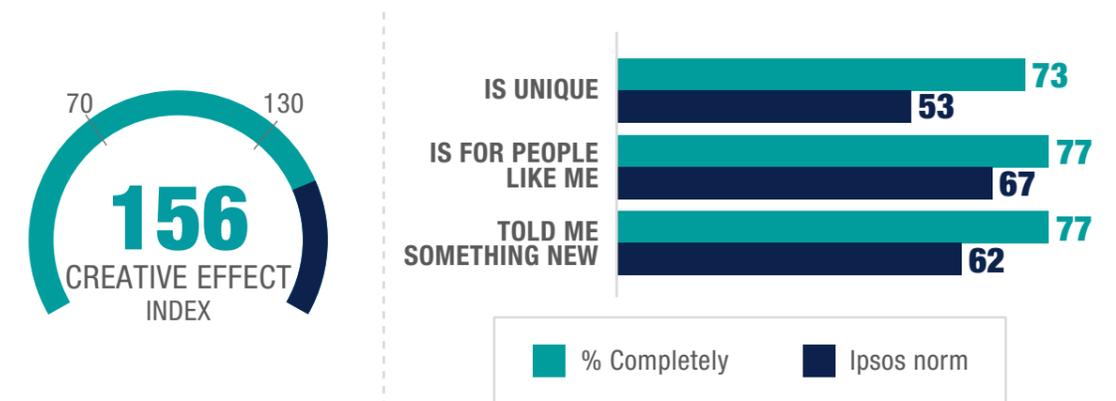
Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Z3zZcGHk-Y>

A great example of an ad that faces this issue is the Corona '77 Earths' ad. The ad is set on a beach, a traditional setting for Corona ads, but with other planet Earths in the sky. The voiceover narration says "if there were 77 Earths, nature would be endless (...) we could let plastic suffocate whole oceans (...) and go on living exactly as we do now, but there aren't 77 Earths. That's why we have a net zero plastic footprint. Join us and protect our oceans."

This ad craftily blends a visually beautiful experience, that hasn't been seen before, with a stark problem - plastic in the oceans – as well as showing that Corona is part of the solution by having a net zero plastic footprint.

It performed well in our CreativeSpark evaluation, with a strong overall creative effect, driven by perceptions of uniqueness, relevance and supported by a strong new idea (Fig. 6).

Figure 6 Corona Creative Effect Index



Source: Ipsos

As a brand born at the beach and deeply connected with nature, Corona wants to do all it can to be an ally to our environment and our oceans. Becoming the first global brand with a net zero plastic footprint is one more step in Corona's broader ambition to help protect the world's oceans and beaches from plastic pollution. But we can't do it alone, we need everyone to join this mission. ”

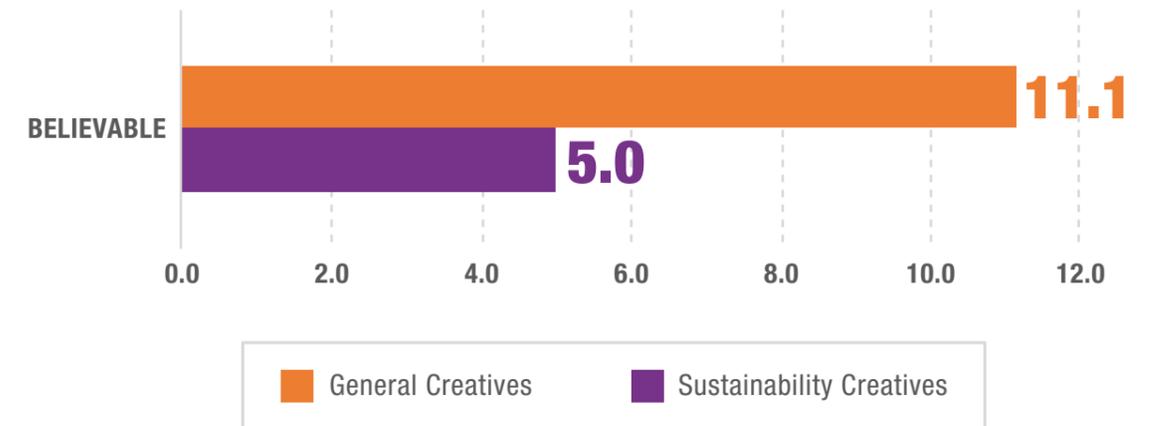
Felipe Ambra, Global Vice President of Marketing, Corona

## 5. TALK THE TALK... AND WALK THE WALK

If we look a bit deeper at the overall effectiveness, we can see what the more tactical drivers of success for advertising are. By comparing the relative strength of drivers of overall effectiveness between ads with a sustainability claim and those without, we can pinpoint which of these are overperforming and underperforming.

**Believability** is one of the key drivers that is lagging behind for sustainability ads today. This suggests that it is underutilised and could have more importance in driving good results, and that sustainability is harder to believe (Fig. 7). Make sure that the claims in your ads are credible and that you are following through on them. Not doing so exposes you to the risk of being accused of greenwashing and facing a media backlash.

Figure 7 Driver of Creative Effectiveness Strength\*



\*Strength of driver is calculated by looking at the average difference of the ad rating 'is believable' between high and low performing ads.

Source: Ipsos

Believability is one of the key drivers that is lagging behind for sustainability ads today.”

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, advertising and sustainability can and should be friends. People want brands to act for a better world and to communicate about it. But just adding a sustainability claim to an ad will not be enough. Ads need to cut through the sea of sameness, and offer a new, entertaining and relevant experience in order to be effective. A good way to do this is to strike the right balance between your own brand benefits and additional sustainability benefits and to put people at the centre of your strategy. By offering them sustainable answers to their problem, you can show that you are part of the solution. On

this journey, watch out for pitfalls that could make you look like the foe; make sure you face the issues if there are some along the way, and most importantly be credible, believable and follow through on what you say; don't oversell your claims.

In the end, the truth is probably that we're starting a challenging transition towards a sustainable future, where much remains to be done. And that transition will not happen without brands taking action, and without great advertising to support those actions.

## REFERENCES

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A woman with dark hair, wearing a pink knitted sweater and a pink skirt, is smiling while talking on a blue mobile phone. She is also holding a white tablet computer. She stands in a warehouse or office space filled with stacks of cardboard boxes on wooden shelves. A large green plant is visible in the background to the right.

Advertising and sustainability can and should be friends. People want brands to act for a better world and to communicate about it. ”

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