

Silencing of Sustainable Communications:

Understanding and Overcoming The Green Hushing Trend

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PURPOSE

The purpose of this paper is to define the emerging trends of greenhushing. Explaining why it had a growing relevance, and exploring what it means for both brands and consumers. As sustainability has become an expectation for corporations, many companies are scaling back or silencing their sustainability messaging. The call to action is to encourage responsible and transparent brand communication when talking about sustainability. This paper aims to understand why sustainability communication practices are changing, these practices' relations to greenhushing, and why transparency is important when it comes to communication.

METHODS

My research was conducted through extensive looks into scholarly papers, news reports, and online articles. I started by researching what greenhushing is and why it started. I made a list of the reasons greenhushing happens and conducted research on each reason. I then looked into why greenhushing is problematic. I did research into two corporate companies and both of their recent sustainability communication practices. These two companies have scaled back sustainability communications in recent years. For the best practices section, I did research into a company that has been doing particularly well in sustainability communication despite the greenhushing trend. I also used sources such as WARC and the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication to confirm what some of the best sustainability communication practices are.

BACKGROUND

As discussed in a study done in The Journal of Advertising Research, Greenhushing is a newer trend that is being seen in communications. When discussing sustainability, companies have been purposely underreporting or avoiding the publication of sustainability efforts. It could also be because companies are taking a step back from sustainability efforts and or communications. Greenhushing can be enacted because of a lack of confidence, a lack of resources to promote sustainability, or to avoid scrutiny of greenwashing (Khan et al., 2025).

One real world example is in an investigation of 300 hotels' sustainability communication efforts. Of the 300, only 38% of hotel websites included sustainability information. Less than 2% had social media posts that mentioned sustainability efforts. Many of these hotels had initiatives around sustainability or third party certifications, but failed to communicate this. Fears of greenwashing accusations and lack of confidence were large contributors to this fact (Khan et al., 2025).

Greenwashing is when companies or organizations make sustainability claims or use deceptive tactics that don't accurately portray their sustainability efforts. Using branding or advertising in ways that deceive consumers into thinking the brand is more environmentally focused than it actually is (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020). This paper also explains that "real green claims would suffer from greater skepticism since it is hard for customers to differentiate the reliability of green marketing initiatives."

An example of greenwashing is when the company LG electronics mislabeled its refrigerators with an eco-label that claimed energy efficiency (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020). This mislabeling was done to ten models of the company's refrigerators. This can lead to confusion among customers and also damage the push for environmental changes.

HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW STUDY

This study of 75 companies explains that most companies aren't retreating from their sustainability efforts. Despite political pressures and information that might say otherwise, only a small amount of companies are rolling back sustainability efforts. Acknowledging the difference between silence and lack of effort is important to continuing to make progress (Hawkins & Cooper, 2025).

IMPORTANT STATS (HAWKINS & COOPER, 2025)

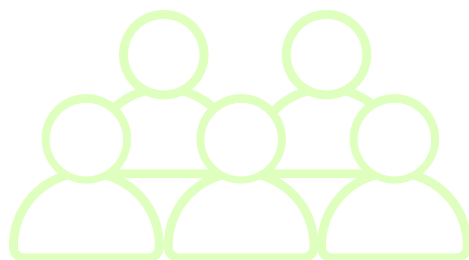
50%

Of companies are downplaying or stopping communications about sustainability efforts



85%

Sustained or expanded sustainability programs



16%

Of those publicly affirmed their commitments to sustainability efforts

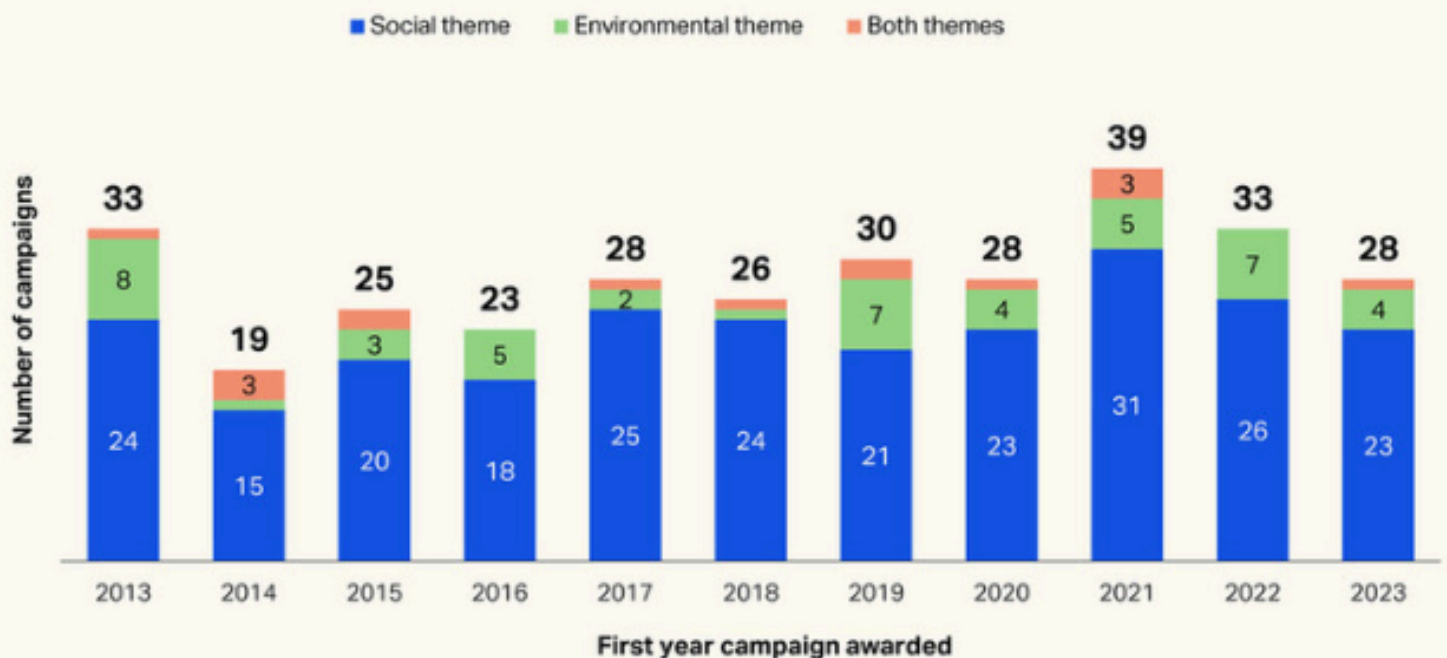


WHY THIS MIGHT BE

WARC, or The World Advertising Research Center, ranks the top 100 most effective advertising campaigns each year. Here is a breakdown of how many campaigns there have been from 2013 - 2023. This chart represents advertisements excluding ones created by non-profit and public sector organizations. This number peaked in 2021 and has since decreased. The effectiveness of sustainability campaigns decreasing could play a role in the rise of the greenhushing phenomenon. A lack of environmental sustainability focused advertisements being ranked on this list could also point to a decrease in the amount that are being produced. On the chart below, we can see that social sustainability campaigns are more likely to make this ranking (WARC, 2024).

Volume of campaigns with sustainability themes by year

WARC Effective 100, 2013 – 2023

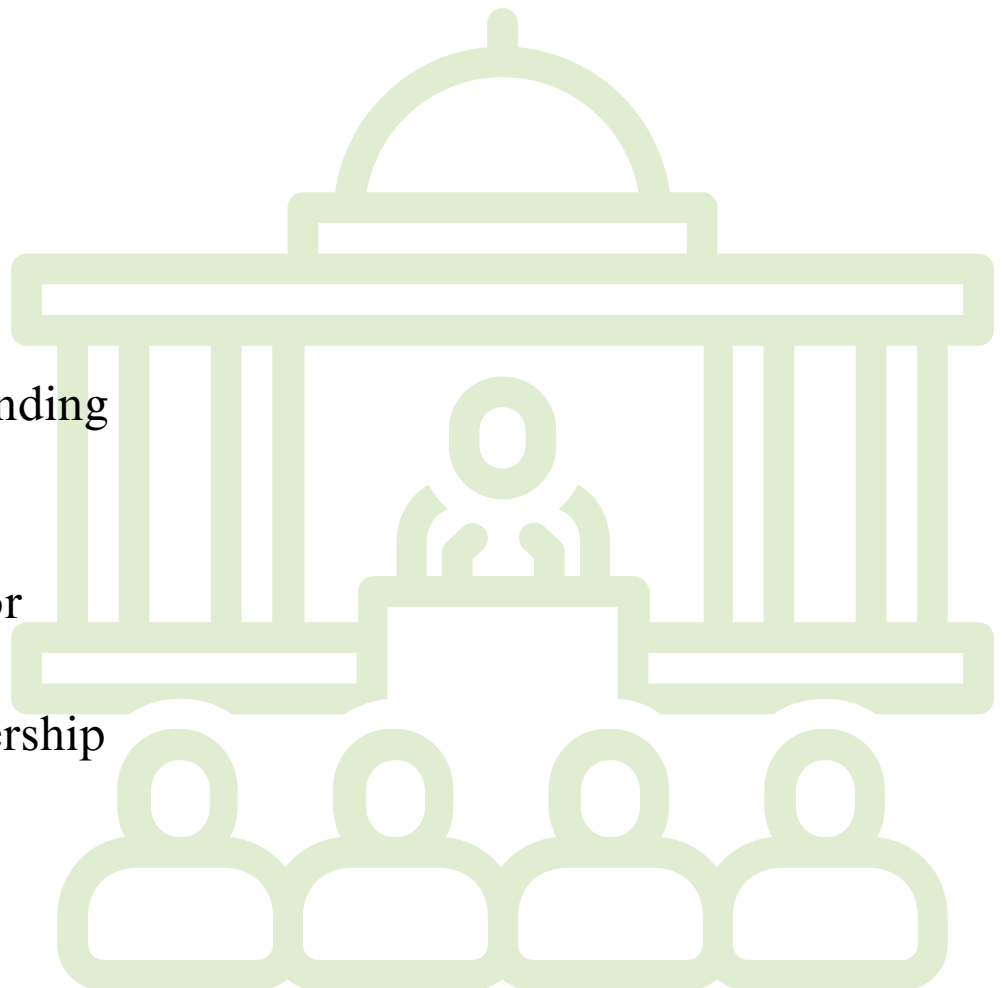


POLITICAL FACTORS

In an article by OneStop ESG, “Companies Quietly Continue Climate Action but Retreat from Public Messaging amid Political Backlash,” the uncertainty of political landscapes is brought up as a contributing factor in the rise of greenhushing. This issue was addressed by Mindy Lubber, CEO of environmental nonprofit Ceres, who explained, “that many firms that once championed ambitious sustainability goals remain committed to implementation but are far more cautious in their communications.”(OnestopESG, 2025).

Factors Include:

- Fear of becoming a political target
- Scrutiny from state officials
- Lawmaker pushback
- Controversies surrounding ESG reporting, and climate action
- Uncertainty of new or changing regulations
- Shifts in federal leadership or policies



FEAR OF GREEN WASHING ACCUSATIONS

Another possible reason for the greenhushing trend is a response to greenwashing. In 1986, the term greenwashing was created to criticize the tourism industry and its reusable towels. The towels were being presented as environmentally conscious resources (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020). Since then, the way this term is used has been adapted to new situations involving over-exaggerating what companies are doing for the environment. The term has evolved over time as well as grown in use (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020).

Companies' fears of being accused of greenwashing have contributed to the rise of greenhushing. This research article suggests that “greenwashing and greenhushing interrelate, arguing that firms increasingly refrain from making green claims or even publishing sustainability goals because they face pressure to avoid accusations of greenwashing” (Rasche, 2025).

In recent years, there has been a loss of people's trust in corporations. In the article “Why We Distrust: American Skepticism Toward Media, Medicine, and Higher Education,” this lack of trust is discussed among healthcare, education, and mass media institutions. It is caused by people believing these sectors care more about profit than people (Nelson & Lewis, 2025). This fear is extended to corporations and contributes to the lack of trust in sustainability practices. A lack of transparency contributes to people not believing in sustainability practices, even if there is relevance to them.

HARMFUL CAUSES AND ISSUES

There has been a recent rise in sustainability commitments in global business. There is also a push from consumers and investors demanding transparency from brands in all aspects, but specifically in the realm of sustainability. There is also a pressure to implement specific regulations from The EU Green Claims Directive and SEC ESG disclosure requirements.

Bad For Brands:

A report by Sustainable Brands states that “New report asserts that businesses that aren't transparent on their ESG progress, for fear of greenwashing, are missing opportunities for investment and gaining credibility with consumers”(Romano, 2023). Potential negative consequences include a loss in profit and a loss of environmental progress. The choice to lean away from environmental communications can be a misstep for corporations. It not only negatively impacts public perception (Georges Simenon & Altrichter, 1988).

Bad For Progress:

The greenhushing tactic takes away opportunities for firms to make new steps towards environmental innovation within their industries. “By failing to share sustainable practices, firms slow the collective advancement towards environmental sustainability, a pace that could be accelerated through collaborative progress inspired by leading companies” (Georges Simenon & Altrichter, 1988). The CEO of environmental nonprofit Ceres suggested that “The hesitancy to disclose climate efforts... could erode trust among stakeholders and stall collective progress toward climate goals” (OnestopESG, 2025).

Bad For Science:

Regulations and environmental frameworks rely on accurate environmental disclosures from companies. Within this transparency can harm long-term sustainability efforts (Georges Simenon & Altrichter, 1988).

COMPANY1: UNILEVER

Unilever is a company known for moving sustainability efforts forward. It has been a leader in this area for years. It has committed to reducing emissions to net zero by 2039. The company has goals to “end plastic pollution through reduction, circulation, and collaboration.” It has many more goals surrounding regenerative agriculture and helping people in its value chain earn living wages (Unilever, 2025).

In April 2024, it stopped efforts for three ESG targets and scaled back on four other ESG targets. These include plastic usage and diversity goals (Davies, 2024). Unilever has also merged its sustainability and external communications divisions. This merger suggests a reduction in priority that sustainability is given within the company (Speed, 2024).

The company has not only made changes to its ESG reporting but also become more financially oriented. It is prioritizing financial performance over social and environmental commitment (Davies, 2024). These changes are likely due to new regulations. The shift is largely because of political changes and changes in shareholder values (Davies, 2024). There is also a fear of consumer backlash, as they have faced greenwashing allegations in the past (Ring, 2024). From these examples it's shown that the company made changes that don't align with its past pledges to sustainability.

COMPANY2: BLACKROCK

BlackRock is a large investment company. It has also participated in the greenhushing trend. In 2020, the company's CEO told other companies that they should invest in sustainability because it will make them more desirable as an investment. This made a large impact for the sustainability effort (Grady, 2024). More companies started to invest in environmental sustainability efforts and take the time to communicate these efforts to stakeholders.

In recent years, BlackRock has been playing less of an active role in sustainability communications. This is largely due to political pressures and investor priorities. The company has been taking a step back from ESG reporting, or at least using related language to ESG's. This decision was made to avoid associating with polarizing language. They have also removed certain climate pledges from their websites (Posner, 2024).

The company has exited from the climate alliance Net Zero Asset Managers initiative. It has decreased its support of environmental shareholder proposals (Valentino & Valentino, 2025). This shows that the company is not only taking a step back in disclosing its sustainability efforts but are also moving away from publicly involving themselves with environmentally focused groups.

BlackRock is a good example of a company that is only interested in finances. The shift from supporting sustainability efforts to a cautious approach to sustainability makes it clear that BlackRock prioritizes profits (Pitcher, 2025).

BEST PRACTICES

Transparency

Corporations can help themselves and the environment by staying honest about their sustainability efforts. They can work to keep sustainability included in their businesses. By incorporating certain practices into their communication strategies and keeping consumers included in this process (The Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, 2015)

One of the most important steps to avoiding greenhushing is being transparent. One thing that greenwashing and greenhushing have in common is that they can both involve providing inaccurate information. It's important that companies use the facts to create transparency and trusting relationships with stakeholders. This article explains that unrealistic claims only create distrust (marketing.nvalue, 2025). This "Prioritizing, integrating, and communicating sustainability to prevent social washing" suggests that How companies present their sustainability actions to stakeholders influences trust, transparency, and accountability. This can be done by using internal audits, third-party verifications, CSR reports, ect. (Vishkaei et al., 2025).

One way to encourage factual reporting is through build-in frameworks. One of those is ESG reporting. ESGs provide a framework for corporate companies to base sustainability efforts on. They give companies a chance to showcase what they are doing in many different areas of sustainability. ESGs also create consistency across the corporate environment. This consistency is important for stakeholder understanding, conducting internal audits, and tracking accurate information.

BEST PRACTICES

Engagement

Getting customers to engage in the sustainability-related content can be done in different ways. “Transforming social or environmental issues into tangible benefits” is a good way to create this engagement (WARC, 2024). The brand Dove is a good example of this. Even though its parent company is Unilever, the company does a good job staying on track with its sustainability efforts. In their Real Beauty campaigns, they get customers to engage in content through boosting their confidence and relating buyers to the broader issue of body positivity (WARC, 2024).

Unique campaigns are important for gaining people’s attention and creating effective campaigns. WARC suggests the use of “creativity to develop innovative solutions... rather than simply raising awareness about an issue.” It’s not only enough to bring up these issues, but creating action is what pushes sustainability efforts forward.

Framing

Framing is important in any type of media. It is the way that information is presented to the audience. It can influence how people perceive the information. In an article from the Guardian, the way framing is used in politics is addressed. The author says that, “environmental issues are often framed in terms of the harm pollution wreaks on the environment. However, when environmental issues are reframed in terms of the conservative value of purity – emphasizing the importance of keeping our forests, drinking water, and skies pure” then people who lean conservative are much more likely to care (Rathje, 2017). This example does a good job of explaining how important it is to know your audience when creating media, advertisements, and communication campaigns.

BEST PRACTICES

The way we frame information to be positive or negative can also have an effect on people's outlooks. Using doomsday language when talking about the environment, often puts people off addressing the issues. This article studied how different ways of framing environmental issues can affect how people engage with sustainability communications. It is explained that stories of innovation and action help people gain motivation instead of a pessimistic outlook (Shepherd, 2021). In an article from WARC, the issue of addressing climate change through emotion is covered. The author talks about how sustainability advertising should be about inspiring change. It is also explained that guilt does not work to change people's opinions or motivate them to take action (Peña-Taylor, 2025).

Another important aspect of framing is keeping information simple. The World Advertising Research Center suggests that "having a core issue, and supporting it over time, is key." This is another area that Dove does a good job at. They have an area they focus on while also continuing work on goals in many aspects of sustainability (WARC, 2024).

Simplicity is also impactful in other ways. You don't want to overwhelm your audience with words they don't understand. Nikki Usher discusses that journalism is often not trusted because people don't think it's for them (Usher, 2021). Keeping information simple and accessible to all can help keep customer trust.

TAKEAWAYS

Conclusion

This paper took a close look at the growing issue of greenhushing in sustainability communications. Exploring why it matters for consumers, companies, and environmental progress. Sustainability is a largely discussed issue that is integrated into many corporations. There has been a recent rise in downplaying sustainability efforts and taking steps back from sustainability communications. By looking into scholarly research, news articles, institutional information, and conducting case studies of two corporations, this paper gives some insight into why this issue is occurring. Exploring issues of why this is happening and what harm it is causing.

This research helped to confirm ways in which businesses can stay away from greenhushing. Through an overview of numerous sources, best practices for sustainability communications are explained. These include the following in campaigns and other communications: transparency, factual reporting, engagement, creativity, framing, positive attitudes, and simplicity.

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