

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

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1, 2, 3, 6, 12, 13, 15 and 17. Understanding the rule of this numerical series can take you time you would probably prefer to spend doing something else. That is why we give you the solution to this puzzle: the series has no logical solution. It does, however, cover some of the **Sustainable Development Goals** (SDGs) that directly follow the strategic plan for the promotion of sustainable agriculture created by the United Nations. If we add the indirect goals, this becomes a transversal issue that affects everyone.

### AN ALWAYS-EXISTING CHALLENGE

From the beginning of existence, humans have always faced this challenge. The means of obtaining and producing food, with agriculture at the base of the chain to a greater or lesser extent, undergoes constant transformation. Similarly, the way we eat and the diets we follow are subject to evolution and, in some cases, trends that are, more or less, temporary. And companies must lead in this area.



Once food goes beyond a concern essentially related with the satisfaction of physiological needs linked to pure survival and safety and these aspects are guaranteed, people begin to worry about the way in which food is produced. Questions such as quality, environmental commitment, animal welfare and nutritional balance, etc. become aspects that influence consumers' decision-making when it comes to making up the shopping basket. In this phase, the sustainability of the value chain also comes in to play. And all of that is reflected in the SDGs. And all of that impacts on communication.

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

Companies, governments and institutions of all kinds are already working intensely to face these challenges, and the key to overcoming them successfully is sustainability. Although it is possible that many consumers may not, at this time, be aware of the problem or the solution.

And this is the challenge that is being faced by the business sector. Not only to communicate and to spread information on these problems, but to 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 for its products and services, while ensuring profitability, environmental health and social and economic equity.” Sustainable agriculture must guarantee global food security, at the same time, promote healthy ecosystems, and support sustainable management of land, water and natural resources.

The agents of food chain production and distribution are aware that sustainability is not only essential for the maintenance of its activity, but it also becomes a differential value. Besides being able to extend productive activity over time, sustainability constitutes a competitive advantage for building reputation when the consumer recognizes that food is produced in a sustainable way.

When sustainability guides the behavior of the agents of the food chain production, and these are capable of communicating this adequately, it turns into a reputational building element. These are the set of shared beliefs in communities that contribute positively or negatively to a company's results. They are 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. There are agricultural models that differ in their processes, as is the case with conventional and organic agriculture. These can be complementary or coexist with each other. However, the principles that govern sustainability must be applied in the same way and must be assessed by using key performance indicators (KPIs). They measure the appropriate management of resources per unit of production, as the final products are what

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

society demands and consumes.

Without further quantifying these indicators in each agricultural production model, we can state that the organic model has worked better in the area of beliefs, occupying a space in the mind of consumers that links them to the values of sustainability.

From a nutritional point of view, there is no evidence of any difference in the quality of the nutrients between organically produced food and conventionally produced

food. The small differences in the contents of nutrients detected are biologically plausible and relate mainly to the differences in the method of production.<sup>4</sup>

Despite this, organic agriculture has been capable of generating shared beliefs on a greater scale regarding its link to food production sustainability 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 smaller-scale consumer of natural resources.

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

**The objectives are essentially geared towards productive sustainability and, beyond that, the mitigation and adaptation of agriculture in relation to climate change.**<sup>7</sup>

Conservation agriculture is barely known among consumers. Therefore, it has the opportunity to occupy a new space related to sustainability that generates value through the reputation of all the agents of the production and distribution chain.

<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 that may lead a company to differentiate itself in terms of activities related to sustainability, but there are three that will have a fundamental role in the immediate future: the generation of alliances, sustainable innovation and communication.

### 1 The Generation of Sustainable Alliances.

- Companies, more than ever, are mobilizing to incorporate in their work models the criteria of sustainability based on a fundamental maxim: **to generate development and wealth without compromising future generations.** However, this great premise, which involves the transformation of an important sector, as important as the agriculture one, cannot be done if it is not in collaboration of three large groups. Companies, as drivers of real change and sustainability.
- The scientific community (universities, social and environmental organizations) as key agents in the development of innovation.
- The government, through policies that favor sustainable growth, delivering campaigns to raise awareness among citizens.

We are talking about multi-sectoral 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 adapt to the traditional working models to conceive of new ones based on the following premises:

- **Trust:** this is the starting point before beginning any job.
- **Long-term vision:** you cannot expect change to happen overnight in such a well-established sector, despite the race against time imposed by climate change. The implementation of innovation requires testing and learning processes and permeation time among society, and in the industry.
- **Collaboration not competency:** a model that is completely different from the traditional one. It requires a change in mentality and constitutes a

great effort given that affects the way we relate between companies within the same sector. It conditions the way we present ourselves to the world, and, of course, conditions the challenges and results obtained, and the concept of reward.

This working model, which may a priori appear utopian, has been implemented within the agriculture sector for years. This is why companies that want to stay in the market must work to achieve the great challenges arising from the international community and that will guarantee the sustainability of this one. There is no other business roadmap other than this one.

### 2 Sustainable innovation of the most traditional sector.

Another line of work will be sustainable innovation. Involving the whole value chain to develop projects and products with the capacity to transform will, very soon, be one of the most useful ways of responding to one of the big global challenges.

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

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

### 3 Communication.

Without a doubt, in light of this, a sector so complex and at the same time so present in the day-to-day of consumers, must place priority on communication and dissemination. Explaining and measuring will be decisive elements to take into account so that companies in the agricultural and food sector can translate their differential value and ensure their transcendental role regarding the sustainability of resources, the planet and life. The challenge is on the table. The measures are many and communication portrays as the best alternative to transform a model that remained unchangeable for centuries.



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