

A low-angle, upward-looking photograph of a dense forest. Numerous tall, slender tree trunks rise from the bottom of the frame towards the top, creating a strong sense of height and growth. The canopy is thick with green leaves, and sunlight filters through, creating a dappled light effect. The overall color palette is dominated by various shades of green and brown.

# **BUILDING BRANDS WITH PURPOSE**

Hear what 250 marketing leaders think.



**climbing**trees





# TABLE OF CONTENTS

4. Foreword, Alex Holliman

6. More about the research

10. The findings

22. Recommendations

24. Who are Climbing Trees?



# FOREWORD, ALEX HOLLIMAN

With a rise in the conscious consumer, there is an ever-increasing need for businesses to build purpose into their brand and marketers need to be at the forefront of this step-change. Aside from it being the morally right thing to do, as an industry we must lead the way in educating, creating, and driving ethical action, for two reasons.

Firstly, marketing communications are often the only connection the outside world has with businesses. As consumers are more enlightened, they're increasingly demanding ethical, purpose-driven businesses. So, it is our responsibility as marketers to tell these stories in an authentic way.

Secondly, with the explosion of social and digital data available, marketers have more access to customers than ever before. We are on the front line of understanding what makes them tick, meaning marketers have more intelligence to feed into product and service development. We should therefore be making an impact on the operations of our businesses by putting the conscious customer's voice front and centre.

However, there is a trust issue that we need to contend with after years of

thin communication veneers covering poor business operations, the need for authenticity and transparency is greater than ever before.

To ensure your marketing output ladders back to your organisation's or client's mission, vision and values are incredibly important. We must not work in siloes, as glossy comms campaigns will quickly be torn apart by today's savvy consumers. It is therefore important for in-house marketers and their agencies, to be working together to build purpose driven brands.

With this in mind, we wanted to get a better understanding of what agency leaders and in-house marketers think about the need for sustainable communications. We set out to make the case for change and identify ways our industry can take the lead in demanding change within our businesses.

The following research comprises of a qualitative survey of 250 agency leaders and senior in-house marketers. We explored ways that agency and client relationships could capitalise on change through collaboration. And our findings didn't disappoint.

Some key themes have emerged which show:

- Clients are driving sustainable marketing practices
- There is a need for agencies and clients to create sustainability strategies
- Clients want more from their agencies
- Budget constraints are considered to be the biggest blocker to making sustainable impact



Alex Holliman, MD at Climbing Trees

*“One of the great things about my role Climbing Trees, is we are able to leave things better than we found them, for our clients, our staff, the environment and those less fortunate than us in society.*

*We get to make an impact by immersing ourselves in our client's world, understanding their business and marketplace to come up with campaigns that will make the biggest impact possible.”*

# MORE ABOUT THE REPORT

We surveyed 266 marketing industry professionals across two surveys: one for agency leaders and another for in-house marketers.



AGENCY OWNERS  
145 RESPONDENTS



IN-HOUSE MARKETERS  
121 RESPONDENTS

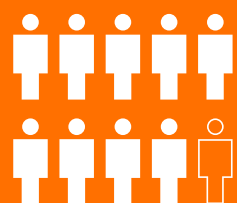
The survey was distributed via Pollfish across the UK and US, to professionals from micro to large organisations.

**Up next:** Highlights from the findings



# 89%

## OF LEADERS THINK AGENCIES HAVE A ROLE TO PLAY IN CREATING A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE



### HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE FINDINGS



46% of agencies said three-quarters of new business opportunities in the past year asked for their ethical credentials



Both agencies and in-house marketers think creating a sustainability strategy is the best way to drive change



28% of in-house marketers will only work with agencies that have sustainability accreditations. However, just 4% of agencies think becoming a B-Corp is important in driving the sustainability agenda

**Up next:** The Research Findings



# THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

## THE AGENCIES

145 agency leaders took part, with agency owners or founders making up 53% of respondents and the remaining 47% were senior leaders or directors.

They revealed an interesting set of priorities for the coming year. Perhaps unsurprisingly after the past two years, new business and talent acquisition and retention rank the highest amongst agency leaders in priorities for the next 12 months. However, 'sustainability' is in the top three priorities which is encouraging.

**Agency priorities in the next 12 months, ranked in order** (the average across respondents)

- 1 **New business**
- 2 **Attracting and retaining talent**
- 3 **Sustainability**
- 4 **Growing existing client base**
- 5 **ED&I initiatives**
- 6 **Investment in tech**
- 7 **Developing a new product or service**

**SUSTAINABILITY COMES OUT IN THE TOP THREE OF AGENCY LEADERES PRIORITIES FOR THE NEXT 12 MONTHS**



With agency new business the number one priority for leaders, it is interesting to note that 46% of agencies said over three-quarters of their new business opportunities in the past 12 months have requested ethical, social, or sustainable impact policies. This suggests that agencies looking for a big new business drive in the coming months will also need to consider their ethical and environmental stance, when tendering.

Developing a new product or service was most polarising. It had the most people ranking it their lowest priority in the next 12 months (57/145), however a further 28 people suggested it was their biggest priority. So, although it came out bottom in the average rankings, it cannot be overlooked as an important priority for agencies in 2022.

**How agencies plan to invest financially in sustainable initiatives in the next 12 months:**



Surprisingly ED&I initiatives have ranked low as a priority in comparison to other areas. Yet, when asked where they plan to invest financially in sustainable initiatives in 2022, 54% of agency leaders said they would in diversity and inclusion.

In fact, there was a fair even distribution of intent to invest financially across the areas we surveyed. Climate change came out on top with 63% of agency leaders saying they would invest here.

A background image showing a green-tinted photograph of wind turbines in a field. In the foreground, a person wearing a high-visibility vest is standing on a metal platform or staircase, likely performing maintenance on one of the turbines.

# THE AGENCY'S ROLE IN DRIVING SUSTAINABILITY

**60% OF AGENCIES PROMOTE  
ETHICAL INITIATIVES IN THEIR  
EXTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS**

When asked if agencies have a role to play in creating a sustainable future – the overwhelming outcome was yes, with just 1% saying they had no role to play and 9% saying maybe in the future, but that it was not currently a priority.

In fact, 27% of owners and directors thought agencies should be leading the way. But 36% (and the highest scoring answer) suggested agencies should take direction from regulating and professional bodies.

## CLIENTS

121 client-side marketers took part, with an even split between the UK (51%) and the US (49%). Most of our respondents were marketing generalists (46%) with 19% working in marketing procurement, 10% in social, 7% in digital and 2% in PR roles.

|                       |            |
|-----------------------|------------|
| <b>B2B</b>            | <b>43%</b> |
| <b>B2C</b>            | <b>30%</b> |
| <b>B2B2C</b>          | <b>19%</b> |
| <b>Not-for-profit</b> | <b>7%</b>  |

They came from a mix of organisations, industries, and sizes. In the future we would seek more data from not-for-profits, so we can better analyse the nuances organisations with purpose baked into their DNA face, in comparison to other entities.





**61% of clients say sustainability is important to their organisation**



**88% of clients refer to their sustainable credentials in their external marketing**

Of our in-house marketers who responded, 61% said sustainability was important to their organisation. This was highlighted with 88% of brand marketers saying they refer to their sustainable credentials, visions, or goals very often or occasionally in their external marketing. Only 11% never reference their sustainable initiatives in their communications. This is important to note as an opportunity for agencies to consider when executing client marketing campaigns.

## COMMUNICATIONS GAP

We split our in-house marketing audience 50:50, when we asked if there was a gap between what their companies say they do in their marketing and the reality when it comes to sustainability. There were several reasons why our respondents felt there was a gap:

Sometimes you have a meeting and you all talk about sustainability, then the company can't do it because of budget constraints and others

We advertise we're a green company but bend the rules to fit our needs

We just do not communicate regularly.

The word sustainability is trending right now, but few know what it really means. My company doesn't

This, therefore, suggests there is an opportunity for in-house marketers to work with the wider business to not only communicate internal narratives, but make sure they are authentic and embedded organisation wide.



# HOW ALIGNED ARE AGENCIES WITH THEIR CLIENTS?

WE WANTED TO FIND OUT HOW ALIGNED AGENCIES AND THEIR CLIENTS WERE, WHEN IT CAME TO THE SUSTAINABILITY AGENDA.

47% of agency leaders said agency and client sustainable agendas are aligned, but 48% said they were only somewhat aligned. Meanwhile, 57% of clients said it was important that they were aligned with their agencies on the sustainability agenda.

*“I don’t think these conversations are happening yet”*

*“It does not align during the briefing stage. It is certainly not in the forefront”*

*“There is a lot of miscommunications”*

*“Most agencies have no morals and only care about the bottom dollar”*

# CLIENTS WANT MORE FROM THEIR AGENCIES

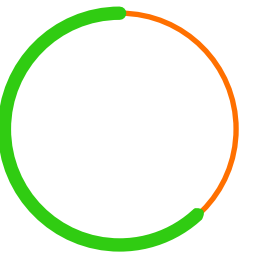
We can see in-house marketers want their agencies to take sustainability seriously. However, it would seem from our data, that agencies are behind the curve when it comes to their actions.

| Clients   | Agencies   |
|---|--|
| We only work with agencies with strong sustainability credentials – 35% | We only work with clients with strong sustainability credentials – 13% |
| We build sustainability into our marketing briefs – 30%                 | We build sustainability into our client briefs – 24%                   |

There is a need for agencies to realise the business imperative of taking sustainable business practices to heart, as it is an agenda that clients are driving and looking for them to lead on.

But are client-side marketers putting an over reliance on their agencies, when it comes to driving sustainability? Only 4%

of in-house marketers say they consider sustainability at every touchpoint of their marketing, versus 19% of agencies. In fact, 12% of clients say they do not consider sustainability in their marketing at all.



57% OF CLIENTS SAY IT IS VERY IMPORTANT TO BE ALIGNED WITH THEIR AGENCIES SUSTAINABLE VALUE



# HOW IS PURPOSE AND SUSTAINABILITY REFLECTED IN YOUR OWN MARKETING?

| Avg. Rank | Agency  | In-house  |
|-----------|---|---|
| 1         | We promote ethical initiatives in our external communications – 25%               | <b>We only work with agencies that have strong sustainable credentials – 30%</b>        |
| 2         | Every touchpoint in our marketing is considered with sustainability in mind – 19% | We follow best practice but nothing more – 26%  |
| 3         | Our website and servers are optimised to be low carbon – 15%                      | We promote sustainable initiatives in our external communications – 17%                 |
| 4         | We follow best practice, but nothing more – 14%                                   | We do not consider sustainability in our marketing – 12%                                |
| 5         | We only work with clients that have strong sustainability credentials – 13%       | Our website and servers are optimised to be low carbon – 8%                             |
| 6         | We do not consider sustainability in our marketing – 12%                          | <b>Every touchpoint in our marketing is considered with sustainability in mind – 4%</b> |

# CREATE A SUSTAINABILITY STRATEGY

It is clear there are some things client-side marketers and agencies agree on, when it comes to sustainability.

Both agencies and clients agreed that the most important way they can drive the sustainability agenda is to **create a sustainability strategy**. This suggests that they’re still lacking across the marketing industry. However, it begs the question, how can strategy be brought to life and have an impact in the real world?

What are the important ways to drive the sustainability agenda?

| Avg. Rank | Agency  | In-house                                       |
|-----------|---|--|
| 1         | Create a sustainability strategy – 26%                  | Create a sustainability strategy – 25%         |
| 2         | Build sustainability into client marketing briefs – 24% | Implement sustainable initiatives – 23%        |
| 3         | Educate clients on how to be more sustainable – 18%     | Engage sustainable marketing practices – 20.5% |
| 4         | Implement sustainable initiatives – 17%                 | Become net zero – 16%                          |
| 5         | Become net zero – 6%                                    | Become a B-Corp – 12%                          |
| 6         | Become a B-Corp – 4%                                    |  |

35%

OF CLIENTS WILL ONLY WORK WITH AGENCIES THAT HAVE STRONG SUSTAINABLE CREDENTIALS



# THE ROLE OF B-CORP AND GREEN ACCREDITATIONS

Climbing Trees are passionate about climate change, we have already signed up to several green initiatives and have our B-Corp certification pending. We were, therefore, shocked to see that just 4% of agencies thought becoming a B-Corp was an important way to drive the sustainability agenda.

While in-house marketers also voted this least important, there was a much higher proportion of voters suggesting becoming B-Corp could make an impact (12%).

What’s more, 28% of clients said they only work with agencies that have accreditations to prove their ethical and sustainable practices. With clients valuing this so highly, it poses a clear remit for agencies to work towards B-Corp (or similar) accreditation if they want to stand out from the crowd in the pitch process.

28%

OF CLIENTS SAID THEY ONLY WORK WITH AGENCIES THAT HAVE ACCREDITATIONS TO PROVE THEIR ETHICAL AND SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES

# BLOCKERS TO MAKING A SUSTAINABLE IMPACT

**Budget constraints** and **senior management** were considered the biggest blockers by both agencies and in-house marketing professionals to driving the sustainability agenda.

| Avg. Rank | Agency   | In-house   |
|-----------|--|--|
| 1         | Budget constraints                               | Senior management                                |
| 2         | Senior management                                | Budget constraints                               |
| 3         | Lack of people resources                         | No clear sustainable roadmap                     |
| 4         | Not considered the role of an agency             | Company has different priorities now             |
| 5         | Lack of internal knowledge and specialist skills | Lack of people resources                         |
| 6         | Not required by clients                          | Not considered the role of marketing             |
| 7         | No clear sustainable roadmap                     | Not required by customers                        |
| 8         | Organisational siloes                            | Organisational siloes                            |
| 9         | There are no blockers                            | Lack of internal knowledge and specialist skills |
| 10        | Agency has different priorities now              | There are no blockers                            |



# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MARKETING PROFESSIONALS

Based on the findings from our research, we have pulled together our top recommendations for agency and client-side marketers looking to make a sustainable impact.



## Become a B-Corp

**Agencies** need to understand the merits of B-Corp (and other accreditations) as clients consider these important factors when pitching and procuring marketing services. [Certified B Corporations](#) are a new breed of business that meet the highest standard of social and environment performance, transparency and legal accountability, to balance profit and purpose.



## Choose your partners carefully

**Client-side marketers** must not be over reliant on their agencies to drive the sustainability agenda. Instead, they need to consider their own sustainability goals and initiatives first, then approach agencies to help achieve them. Partner with agencies that align with these values, and use the RFI and pitch process to dig beneath the surface to uncover their ethical practices.



## Get close to your organisation's sustainability goals

Internal marketing departments must get closer to the purpose led goals set by their organisations, in order to better reflect the mission, vision, and values in their internal and external communications.



## Embed a sustainability strategy

Both **agencies** and **clients** need to spend time creating sustainability strategies. But it will be important to consider how these will be implemented to have long-term impact. Your strategy will need to be embedded across the business, and employees will need to understand how they can make an impact on a day-to-day basis. This will require strong employee engagement and internal communications, another opportunity for marketing teams to make an impact.



## Understand your digital carbon footprint

Marketers need to be more aware of their digital carbon footprint and make strides to reduce these. The answer is not always to shift physical or 'in real-life' campaigns online. Businesses of all sizes can benefit from getting closer to their digital carbon footprint, have a [digital declutter](#). Use a [website carbon calculator](#) to understand how your site stacks up and gain recommendations on how to make it more



## Make the most of available budget

**Agency** and in-house teams alike need to free up budget and shift their mindset to make an impact, when it comes to driving a purpose led approach to marketing. However, marketers have a role to educate their leaders and apportion available



# Climbing Trees

Positive Digital Marketing. For Good.



WE'D LOVE TO HEAR FROM YOU

[hello@climbingtrees.com](mailto:hello@climbingtrees.com)  
01206 587 207

We are a team of digital marketing experts that put purpose at the heart of everything we do. From the clients we work with to the technology, tools, and techniques we use to achieve digital marketing goals, we believe in being a force for good.

Specialising in organic search and paid digital strategies, we help ambitious brands like Greenpeace, Olympus and Orangutan SOS grow their online presence.

We partner with clients and agencies that share our values and want to leave the world a better place. If you want to find out more about our research, or how we could work together, get in touch.



**climbing**trees