HOW TO BE SUCCESSFUL IN SUSTAINABILITY COMMUNICATIONS

Effectively and Accurately Share Your Sustainability Message

aoe

Advancing Organizational Excellence

Sustainability communication is the act of consciously integrating sustainability in a communication strategy by telling stakeholders about a company's sustainability goals and efforts.

E.S.G. & C.S.R

There are a variety of ways to measure the success of an organization—its financial health, its longevity through good times and bad, the strength of its leadership, the loyalty of its customers—but in recent years, the definition of success has shifted from a purely financial meaning to one that also includes how a business impacts the world around it. Now, companies are being evaluated by investors, customers and the general public on **environmental, social and governance metrics** (also known as ESG), and are beginning to see the rewards—and consequences—of their business's actions.

It's important to note that ESG ratings are not regulated by any government agency, so criteria may be inconsistent across rating agencies. They also encompass hundreds of factors, including the following:

Environmental (how your organization positively or negatively impacts the physical natural world):

- Carbon emissions
- Energy consumption
- Use of renewable energy
- Pollution
- Water/wastewater management
- Waste and hazardous materials management

Social (how your organization impacts its employees, stakeholders and society in general):

- Labor practices
- Health and safety
- Diversity, equity and inclusion
- Treatment of employees
- Community relations and engagement
- Relationships with suppliers

Governance (how your organization is run):

- Board diversity
- Executive compensation
- Overall ethical behavior
- Data security
- Policies
- Supply chain management
- Political contributions
- Internal corruption

While the push for sustainability objectives is now commonplace, how to communicate your progress can be daunting and confusing. **The goal of your sustainability communications plan should be to create a common understanding of sustainability challenges and build trust.** Although ESG is a relatively new acronym for many of us, **Corporate Social Responsibility** (CSR) is a familiar concept that relates to ESG. CSR is a business model that helps a company be socially accountable to itself, its stakeholders and the public.

Why Communicate about Sustainability?

- **Inform/Involve:** While it is vital for companies to integrate sustainability in their business strategies and operations, it is also crucial to inform – even involve – their stakeholders.
- **Differentiate:** Create a competitive advantage that helps business performance.
- **Reputation:** When a company or brand embraces purpose, they build reputation and grow loyalty over time.
- **It Pays!** Investors are paying attention to sustainability, as "they begin to look beyond short-term investment horizons to the creation of longer-term shareholder value."

What Makes it so Hard?

Misinformation, mistrust and a lack of immediate benefits to the audience all make it a challenge to successfully communicate sustainability.

- **Justified mistrust.** Some talking about sustainability are doing it because they have to, which might not affect the final outcome, but does raise the question of the validity of the purpose behind it.
- **Widespread misinformation.** We have been bombarded with information that at best unconsciously confuses and at worst consciously misleads.
- **Requires change.** Either in thinking or action or both, and it's hard to shift people's mentality when there's often no immediate benefit to them.
- **Sustainability is not an opinion.** If the communication is based on truth, scientific and possibly complex facts are needed to tell the story.

To have a positive impact is very hard, while a net impact is (hopefully) achievable and a negative one is very easy. This means that for every good thing you're doing, there's a high chance of at least another one that is not that great. Sharing that you aren't doing that great is never fun.

In order to communicate sustainability, you must **do** sustainability. How you talk about environmental or social sustainability should only come after you have done something about it. It's okay (and expected) for your efforts to be a work in progress.

Sustainability communication starts with a **declaration of intent.** Then, it is a matter of regularly communicating about the status of the sustainability activities and the progress being made.

To avoid *greenwashing,* substantiate any claims and provide updates.

AOE recognizes the great need for sustainability communications expertise and has therefore formed a practice group specializing in how to share your sustainability story. The following tips provide a primer on assembling your plan so you can effectively communicate your journey.

Greenwashing ('griːn.wa.ʃɪŋ)
a practice in which a business portrays a product, service, policy or activity as being more environmentally friendly (or less environmentally damaging) than it actually is in order to deceive consumers

Examples
- using terms such as "eco-friendly" that are not vague and unverifiable
- using images of leaves or nature on product packaging without changing anything about the product itself
- labeling materials as "recycled" to draw attention away from the fact that they are developed through exploitative means

Top 10 Tips for Effective Sustainability Communications

1. Have a Plan:

- Like all other corporate objectives, outline your audience, key messages, strategies and goals.
- Dermine what metrics are most important to your company and what messages you want to communicate
- Clear priorities and business strategy should inform the hierarchy of information you share.

2. Be True to Your Brand

- Align your sustainability, CSR and ESG efforts with your values, brand attributes and business strategies.
- Don't try to change your brand's personality to fit your message.
- Focus on making the link to your brand while telling your sustainability story.

3. Keep it Simple

- Avoid a "kitchen sink" mentality—don't try to do everything all at once.
- Resist the temptation to include every possible piece of information.
- **Don't throw around words that nobody knows the meaning of.**

"CARBONOMICS"
"BIOCONTRIBUTIVE"
"CIRCULAR ECONOMY"
"CONSCIOUS CAPITALISM"
"REGENERATIVE"
"SOCIOTECHNICAL IMAGINARIES"

4. Keep it Relatable

- Tell stories that are succinct and personal.
- Showcase people to help your audience connect to your message.
- Avoid jargon; write in a clear, conversational tone.

5A. Make it Visual...

- Use infographics, charts, callouts and key stats to make complex ideas more digestable.
- **Enrich your storytelling with video and animations.**
- Remember graphic design best practices: uncrowded layouts mean optimum readability.

SO. MUCH. GREEN.

WHAT INDUSTRY DOES THIS IMAGE EVEN REPRESENT?

IMAGE #5982 IN THE "HANDS-HOLDING-LIGHTBULBS" STOCK PHOTO COLLECTION

"JUST THROW A BUNCH OF RECYCLING AND NATURE ICONS ON THERE AND CALL IT A DAY."

5B. ...but Avoid Cliches

- Avoid visual cliches; they make you look disingenuous.
- Use imagery that is applicable to your organization and industry so your message has credibility.
- You can use green, but don't force it! When overdone, it seems lazy and trite.

6. Know your Audience

- Outline key messages specifically for each persona; don't use the same message for all audiences.
- Keep language accessible; customers don't want to wade through a bunch of jargon to find what they seek.

7. Tell the Truth

- Don't embellish your efforts; it can take years to regain trust once it's been broken.
- Communicate your progress in an authentic, transparent manner, sharing your good faith efforts as well as the obstacles you've encountered along the way. Emphasize your progress, not just final results.

8. Be Engaging

- Create connections and engage with your audience by being open and conversational.
- Sell the positive; don't use catastrophe or scare tactics, both of which create skepticism.

9. Be Different

- Don't emulate others; what works for them may not work for you.
- Create active engagement that is unique with your audiences.

10. Don't Overuse the Word "Sustainable"

- The report **Words that work: Effective language in sustainability communications** suggests that, on average, the word "sustainability" is repeated ten times on each sustainability webpage of Forbes' top 50 brands, while the most sustainable brands only used it once.

Know Your Terminology!

When talking about sustainability, the words you use *matter*.

Going "green" or being sustainable is an important part of the discussion in design, construction, industrial and chemical markets. However, we need to ensure that our target audiences understand what it means to be sustainable. At a recent PCA Promoter's Forum, it was estimated by the audience that only 40–50 percent of the design community have a good understanding of sustainability. Yet, since they are the ones writing specs, at least 80–90 percent of that group needs to have a really good understanding of what it takes to be sustainable. This shows that the message hasn't been as thorough or as widespread as it needs to be.

How does the misunderstanding and lack of information occur? People make decisions based on information that has appeared from various sources, **such as social media, where information is not always verified or accurate.** The source of information needs to be fully transparent and the whole life cycle of the product or building system should be evaluated.
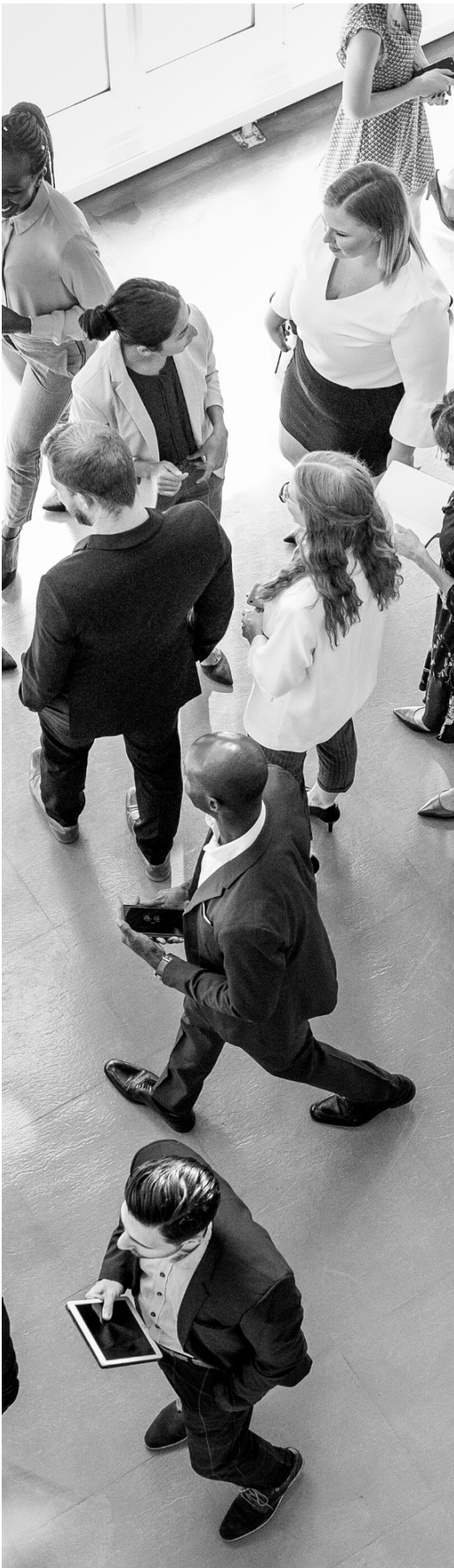
And, if you've ever been in a conversation about being sustainable, you may have heard various words thrown around, such as "low carbon footprint," "carbon offset," "net-zero," "carbon neutral" and more. As Andrea Schokker, Ph.D., explains in her white paper, "Carbon Neutral Concrete: What Does it really mean?," the word "carbon" is being used to represent slightly different meanings. To begin with, it can represent CO_2, or, in some cases, CO_2 equivalents (combined impact of all greenhouse gases). Schokker explains how two popular terms should be differentiated:

- **Carbon neutral.** This is a neutral effect of CO_2 on the atmosphere. To be carbon neutral, any CO_2 emissions released must be balanced by an equal amount of CO_2 being removed from the atmosphere through carbon sinks, carbon sequestration (CS) or offsets.

- **Net-zero.** Here, carbon emissions refers to an activity that releases a net of zero CO_2 into the atmosphere.

These two terms are very similar, and the result for both is to balance carbon emissions. The difference is that in the net-zero case, no carbon was emitted from the activity in the first place.

This is just a glimpse into terminology, but it shows how important it is to understand what you are referring to when communicating about carbon emissions. Know your terminology and make sure your audience understands it as well.

SUSTAINABILITY JUST MEANS OVERSIMPLIFICATION

CARBON NEUTRALITY IS ACTUALLY ABOUT TOTAL INACCURACY!

Why ESG Principles are Good for Your Employees

We know that adhering to environmental, social and governance (ESG) principles makes the world (and your work!) a better place, but have you considered how these improvements could extend into your specific organization and empower your employees?

Sustainability will matter to employees if they can see that it matters to the organization. Set clear and attainable sustainability goals. It's okay to start small and take it step by step, but having a thought-out plan that employees are aware of and can understand is crucial to ensure responsible decision-making with sustainability in mind.

A few examples include being mindful of the carbon footprint created by team member travel, or the amount of paper/plastic waste being created by an office and looking for ways to offset those things. Ideas for solutions could come from employee resource groups, or ERGs. These groups can discuss challenges and opportunities and bring matters to the attention of higher-ups.

Empower Employees with Education

Whether an employee is new to the idea of ESG principles or has previous experience with them, continued education from your organization is immensely valuable. Meet employees where they are and help them feel supported on their ESG continuum.

Having a formal ESG plan can be greatly beneficial for your employees. The resource can allow them to learn about your organization's values and see what actions it is taking to work towards sustainability goals. The information that an ESG plan can provide will also allow employees to confidently answer questions from clients, stakeholders, or other industry professionals who also undoubtedly have ESG at top of mind.

Engage Employees by Measuring and Promoting Progress

By setting up metrics to track your organization's progress towards your ESG/sustainability goals, you have a unique opportunity to actively involve employees as subject matter experts or volunteers and develop similar metrics they can use in their individual and collective business dealings.

By incorporating ESG principles into your strategy and educating employees on their importance, you are building these values into your organization's foundation. You can choose aspects that are in line with your company culture so that these efforts feel genuine and meaningful. ESG is beneficial for all, and employees and organizations that embrace ESG will be better for it.

Events can be Sustainable, Too!

Whether or not your organization has shared an environmental statement or has had to respond to your carbon footprint in a bid for work, these trends continue to show up in everything from vendor selection to ratings on job boards for potential employees. As such, it is no surprise that big events are also looking to showcase their programs to potential attendees. Here are a few ideas on how to make your events more sustainable:

Reduce Paper and Waste

It's hard to make a case of sustainability if you killed a small forest with paper handouts. Explore options for sharing information using QR codes or follow-up via email.

Skip the Disposable Trinkets

Don't give out swag that'll just end up in the landfill. Opt for giveaways that can be used for a long time or are consumable. Or, donate to a charity instead and let booth visitors know of your decision.
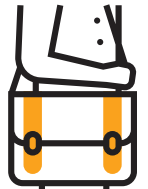
Be Selective About Food Options

Package it in reusable or compostable containers, select a local vendor, and allow attendees to select their meals, when possible, to eliminate waste. Then, have a plan for donating what is left!

Reduce Automobile Impact

Provide options for carpooling, shuttle buses, use of e-bikes or public transportation for your attendees to lessen the automobile impact.
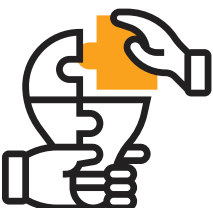
Include Diversity in Your Planning

Have diverse voices present for every step of the process. Be sure to provide accessible options for presentations and activities, as well as a forum for feedback related to DEI initiatives.

What is the Relationship Between Equity and Sustainability?

At a glance, you may think that diversity and equity are an entirely different topic from sustainability, but in actuality, sustainability is about the responsibility to our environment, our surrounding communities, and our employees.

So, just how is equity related to sustainability? Consider that the journey to sustainability is actually the sum of many goals. These include dealing with safety for employees and the community around projects, organizational excellence and leadership at the corporate level, economic strength, transformation, climate, as well as diversity and equity.

At AOE, we are seeing the diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) topic surface a lot related to our industry discussions about sustainability and resiliency. While at first glance the connection took us for pause, with a deeper dive on these topics, it makes great sense. DEI at an organization refers to the responsibility of that entity to ensure that civil and human rights are preserved and protected for each individual, and that all persons are treated equally and without prejudice.

This extends to the community as well, and also includes environmental justice, which refers to the fair treatment and meaningful engagement of all people with regard to environmental protection. It's social sustainability. The same efforts to preserve surrounding green areas should be provided to all neighborhoods. Additionally, all neighborhoods, all people, deserve equal infrastructure updates to make areas more livable and accessible to work opportunities. Another example of social sustainability includes looking at transportation needs and working with the community can ensure that projects are built near public or shared transportation options.

DIVERSITY, EQUITY & INCLUSION
PRACTICE GROUP

From another aspect of social sustainability in the workplace, a company needs to *protect and enhance the safety and health of all employees*, including those with disabilities.

The community also should be afforded safety around projects and ease of access for everyone. Accommodations should be made so everyone can be equally safe at work and out in the community.

Remember that, unfortunately, construction projects are often perceived as having negative impacts on communities. This is where the importance of sustainable development can be stressed. The "not in my backyard" mentality can be addressed through active engagement with the community and the proper alignment of projects with community needs and goals. Through strong leadership, a community's concerns are confronted, and conflicts can be avoided.

By ensuring that equity, diversity and social justice are fundamental considerations within a project's process and decision making, a company can meet the needs of their employees as well as the community. For any project, include social sustainability in the stakeholder engagement and project team commitments.

How to Address DEI in Conjunction with Your Sustainability Efforts

Experience has proven that a DEI strategy is essential to programming success. A DEI strategy should define the short-term and long-term goals, priorities and initiatives for the organization. The process provides direction on how to achieve these objectives, including:

- Creating a DEI internal and external statement.
- Continuous DEI educational programs for the team.
- A DEI Communication plan that communicates the DEI mission/vision and strategy internally and externally, includes the onboarding process, and defines their digital brand to include DEI information on the website and in social media.

- Designing a talent pipeline focused on increasing diversity in the hiring, promotion and succession planning process.
- Listing the initiatives on which the firm decides to focus (based on the survey and data collection).
- Defining metrics and creating a tracking process.

Still stuck on how to get started? AOE's unique benchmark tool, designed specifically for technical industries and communities, helps organizations determine where they are related to the following areas:

- **Leadership Accountability:** DEI is integrated into strategic objectives, vision and metrics.
- **Talent Integration and Strategy:** DEI is recognized for generating high performing teams. Activities may include career development, mentoring, performance management, succession planning, training, as well as recruiting and hiring.
- **Operations Integration:** AOE will measure policies and practices regarding how they reflect and reinforce DEI strategy.
- **Marketing/Marketplace/Community Integration:** DEI strategies are integrated into marketing, marketplace as well as community stakeholder activities such as branding and corporate image, sales and marketing, community and marketplace relations, as well as supplier diversity.

The AOE tool goes far beyond measuring quotas and numbers—it also addresses DEI-related concepts including intent, language and visual messages, as well as how diversity, equity and inclusion are integrated into an organization from a strategic standpoint. Upon completion of the assessment, real-time data is provided including the degree to which the organization supports DEI and where they are in their journey (based on a proprietary maturity model). Feedback is provided along with a suggested roadmap to meet their DEI goals, which may include training such as implicit bias education, a branding audit or modification of recruiting activities. As the organization moves through the various phases of their DEI roadmap, AOE is with them every step of the way.

Take the Quiz

Is DEI a part of your culture? Do you have a truly inclusive environment? Knowing where you are in the DEI journey is an important first step in designing your program. Saxum identified **10 questions** to ask ourselves to get a clear picture of where your organization is and what your next steps should be.

1. **Is our environment safe enough for everyone to feel like they belong?**

2. **Are we an employer of choice for BBIPOC (Black, Brown, Indigenous, People of Color)?**

3. **Who's in the room, and who's trying to get in the room but can't?**

4. **Is our organization a space where all ideas are heard?**

5. **How can we use our organization's overall strength to our advantage in developing our DEI strategy?**

6. **Who will lead this effort, help develop benchmarks, hold us accountable and ensure we're on track?**

7. **Who will be the stakeholders, advocates and benefactors of this change?**

8. **What are the resources necessary to implement and support a robust strategy?**

9. **How do we get everyone in our organization on board?**

10. **How long will it take before we see and feel change?**

If you don't have all the answers, that's okay. This is a journey and AOE is here to help you every step of the way.

Communicating ESG Data Effectively

The construction industry's latest reporting requirement addition is the disclosure of environmental, social and corporate governance (ESG) data. Although ESG and sustainability are sometimes used interchangeably, they are different. Simply put, sustainability is just one part of ESG. It can be explained in that sustainability describes a company's relationship to the environment, while ESG broadens that relationship to encompass social responsibility and ethics.

In the clamor for more information and reporting, there is currently little guidance for companies attempting to follow ESG reporting. This includes where to begin, as well as what exactly should be disclosed. ESG reporting is designed to highlight your company's activities, while improving transparency. Reporting is also an effective way to demonstrate to investors that you're meeting your goals.

Despite the lack of consistent standards, third-party companies now can guide members of our industry through the reporting process, developing the data needed to report to investors. After the data is complete, it is equally important to present the information in an easily understood format so investors can quickly and effortlessly find the information they need. To ensure that the final data is communicated in the best method possible, here are some key steps:

- **Work with professional communicators.** Have writers and designers bring the data together in a professional looking brochure website.
- **Be visual.** Have the designer create charts and infographics will ensure that the final data is communicated in the best method possible and is easy to understand. Also, make sure the brochure follows all corporate branding.
- **Distribute the information to investors.** The final electronic brochure can be emailed to investors when requested. It can also reside on your website.
- **Don't forget your website.** The information from the ESG report can also be divided up and included in various places on your company's website. Whether it is your company's policies; workplace health and safety; sustainability; diversity, equity and inclusion; or other topics, the information can be in as much depth as needed for the website.

In terms of content, typical information includes:

- Sustainability
- Greenhouse gas emissions
- Water consumption
- Safety culture
- Diversity, equity and inclusion
- Crisis Response
- Leadership
- Employee health and wellness
- Community service
- Philanthropy
- Ethics and compliance
- Risk Management

Data Visualization Best Practices

Since so much of your ESG reporting may be numbers, it is key to know how to effectively share this data. When used properly, charts and graphs are a very effective way to communicate data. However, simple missteps in design can muddle your data, weaken your message and confuse your audience. Avoid common mistakes by following these best practices to ensure that your message is heard loud—and clear!
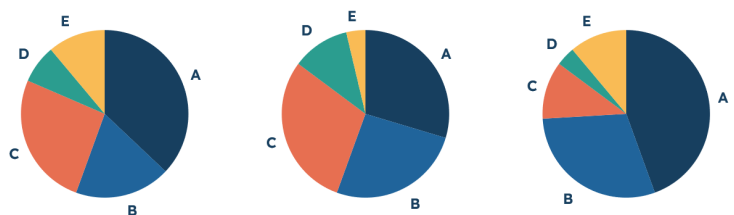
Pie Charts

You may be surprised to hear that the pie chart—one of the most commonly used statistical graphics in business, marketing and media—is considered "data visualization's greatest villain" according to experts in the field. So how did it earn its bad reputation? It turns out that pie charts are actually pretty hard to read. Our brains aren't the best at interpreting the size of each slice of pie relative to one another, and when there are too many slices, or slices that are too close in size, we really struggle to grasp what it is we're being shown.

That isn't to say that you should never use a pie chart again, but if you do, there are several rules to follow:
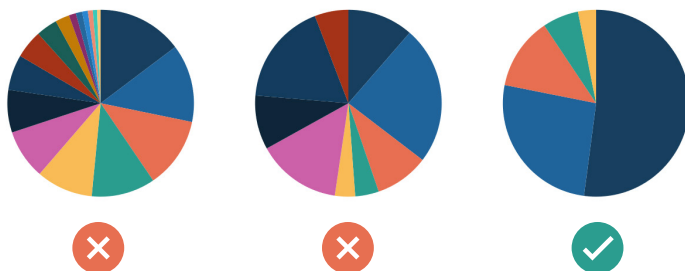
The fewer slices, the better; too many slices makes a chart difficult to read. Try to limit yourself to five or fewer sections, ideally with data points that are significantly different enough to make the slices discernibly different in size. Also, remember to start with the largest slice at the top of the chart, working your way clockwise around the circle in increasingly smaller slices.

Avoid comparing pie charts to one another. If one pie chart is difficult to read, interpreting multiple pie charts is even harder. The three pie charts at the right depict changes over a period of time. Some of the slices noticeably grow or shrink, but determining if others change (and if so, by how much?) is much harder. Taking that same data and putting it into a bar graph allows us to see these changes much more precisely and in a format that is easier for our brains to interpret.

Don't use 3D pie charts. The tilted angle at which these kinds of charts are displayed can make sections in the foreground appear deceptively larger than those in the background. In the example at the left, the yellow and blue slices each represent 10 percent of the pie chart, but they don't appear to be the same size.

Bar and Column Graphs

Another common presentation selection, the bar graph is considered slightly more acceptable than its problematic cousin, the pie chart. However, improper design of a bar graph can reduce your data's readability and clarity. Follow these rules to ensure your graphs convey your message accurately and effectively:
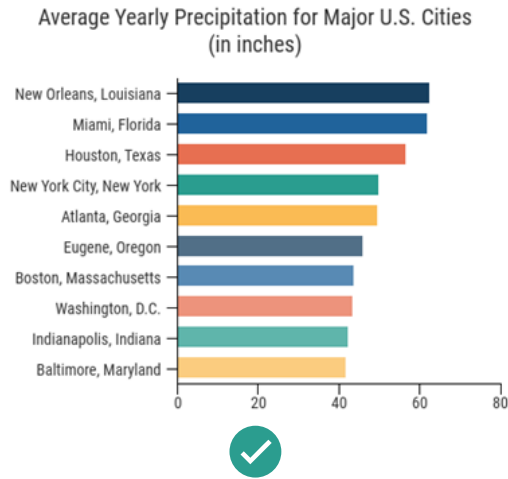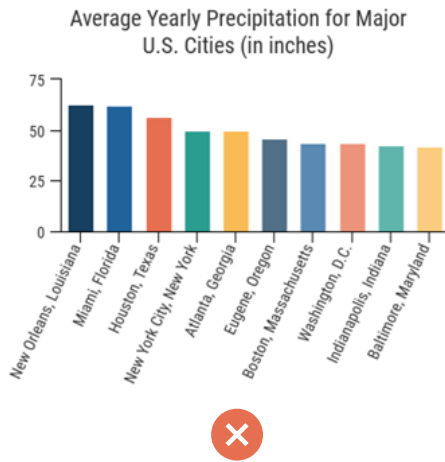
Readability is key. Don't make your viewers tilt their heads to read labels on an angle; switch the information on the axis so that your longest labels can be read horizontally.

Rank data points by size. It's difficult to understand the comparative size of each bar when they're not in order. The exception to this is to when using multiple graphs to depict changes over time.
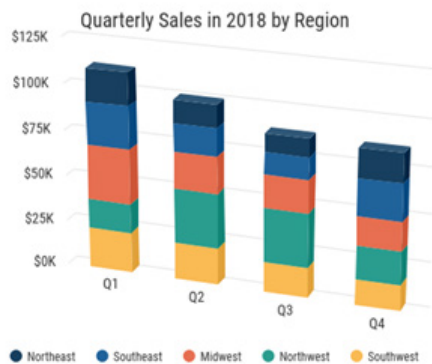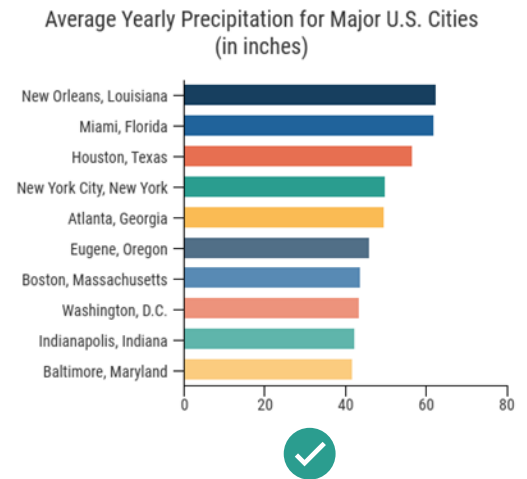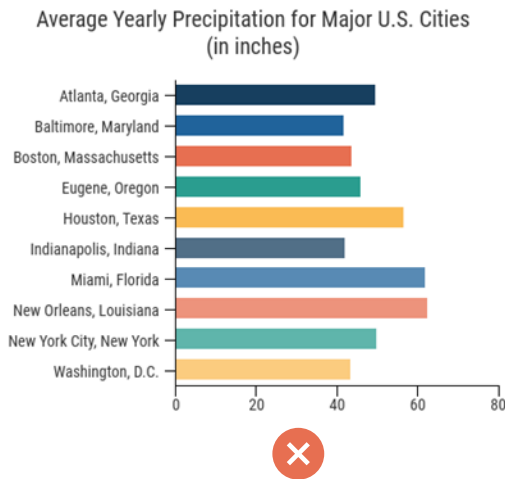

Avoid 3D graphs. Just like with pie charts, 3D makes your data difficult to read. It also distracts from the information you're trying to present.

Taking just a few extra steps to ensure you're following the rules of data visualization will help you create charts and graphs that are trustworthy, unambiguous and persuasive. In turn, they will convey your data in a much more powerful way, strengthening your sustainability communications efforts.

Next Steps
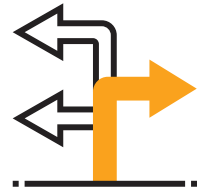
Whether you have an established sustainability communications process and just need help fine-tuning it, or you are just starting out and don't know where to begin, AOE has experience and expertise in helping organizations with their ESG statements, sustainability PR programs, employee communication plans and much more. Contact the AOE Team today for a free consultation.

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