



INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATIONS
CONSULTANCY ORGANIZATION

ICCO Sustainability and Climate Communications Charter

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This Sustainability Charter and the Climate Code serves as a guideline for the members of industry organisations within the communications sector, to use as a framework for delivering the most ethical, professional, clear, constructive communication work on sustainability and climate issues.

BACKGROUND

The Charter was initially developed by the Austrian Public Relations Association (PRVA), together with environmental and sustainability experts, and in coordination with ICCO's members in Germany and Switzerland. Further input came from ICCO's other member associations around the world.

All ICCO member associations are encouraged to adopt and implement the Charter at regional and national level.

PREAMBLE, PRESENT STATE OF AFFAIRS

The continued transformation of society and the global economy towards a more sustainable future brings both great challenges and opportunities for PR and communications. The climate crisis has become a fixture of daily life, politics, and business, and must therefore be central to the work of PR and communications agencies.

Sustainability should not be an isolated issue, but needs to be embedded within the culture of every communications business. As consultants and advisors to hugely influential brands, governments, NGOs, and individuals, we possess an immense capacity to shape public opinion, affect behavioural change and generate a long-term, lasting impact. Therefore, sustainability is the responsibility of every PR professional and organisation.

Professional sustainability and climate communication is essential for informed, transparent, and impartial discourse amongst all stakeholders and citizen groups.

Legally prescribed reporting obligations for companies on sustainability issues are rightly increasing, as is the demand for more detailed information on the part of consumers, business partners and civil society.

Compliance with the latest sustainability legislation, such as the European Green Deal, has already had a profound effect upon the PR sector and corporate communications comprehensively, and will continue to be decisive for their success in the future.

These changes require supporting structures that the PR industry must build for itself.

Communications organisations must bear responsibility for ensuring best practice is embedded across management, internal policies, training, and employee education, first and foremost. This will make for better, more informed communication and advising with clients, media and other stakeholders.

As regulations tighten, and expectations from clients continue to increase, agencies must recognise the need to adhere to the latest requirements, document business practices to the highest possible standards, and be a sustainable part of their clients' supply chains.

The benefits go beyond regulatory diligence, meeting client expectations, and appealing to customers. Employees within the profession are increasingly demanding an active commitment to sustainability from their employers. This trend continues to grow with younger generations placing an ever higher importance on ethical, sustainable business practices when seeking employment.

The entire media ecosystem, including journalism and politics, are also encouraged to intensify knowledge exchange, better cooperation, and foster the development of common communication standards in order to contribute to a long-term sustainable future with a better informed, more transparent public discourse on climate and sustainability.

HOW WE VIEW SUSTAINABILITY

As communication experts within ICCO, we bear a holistic view and understanding of sustainability that is closely aligned with the United Nations' Agenda 2030 and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In this sense:

- a) Sustainability is only that which brings about actual, positive effects (impact) and achieves a measurable change in terms of social, ecological and economic sustainability;
- b) Sustainable development can only be achieved through the simultaneous and equal consideration and implementation of environmental, social and economic goals; and
- c) Responsible corporate management and communication are intrinsic to those aspects and have both the sustainability of its own agency/company and that of its clients firmly in mind.

By adopting this Sustainability Charter, ICCO and its members support the following views and commitments in their daily work in the communications industry:

1. The climate crisis and its consequences, is the most urgent issue for humanity overall in this century. It endangers the livelihoods of people and societies across the globe and is therefore its top priority. A stable climate is a prerequisite for a safe and peaceful civilisation and thus has drawn an increasing amount of attention in professional PR consulting, media, information and public relations work.
2. ICCO members recognise the scientific evidence of climate change, humanity's contribution to it, and refute counter claims to those contentions, or those made by climate deniers. ICCO members ensure staff are adequately versed in the latest climate evidence, use only such scientific facts in their client work, and advise clients against any claims, assumptions or insinuations that are not based in science.

3. The communications sector acknowledges its duty of prioritising the climate crisis in relation to the actions and activities of its clients, and to never ignore or minimize the impact of business activities. Responsible communications professionals must do their best not to downplay the severity of the climate problem or its ramifications in their approach, the language they use, or the images they choose to publish.
4. Communication about sustainability and climate preservation is a crucial component of professional, nonpartisan PR work; it does not constitute political activism. Highlighting the effects of climate change, and presenting various solutions and strategies to organisations, government agencies, and civil society, are integral to communicating about the complex subject of the environment, thus are the responsibility of trained PR experts and communicators who possess the necessary expertise.

Focusing on beneficial ecological, social, and economic effects

As PR consultants and communication experts, we consider the following three broad areas when strategising our activities:

1. 'Footprint' - avoiding/reducing negative impacts

Our guiding principle, to which we hold ourselves and our clients, is avoiding negative impacts overall before reduction or compensation are necessary. This approach promotes utilising resources responsibly and contributes to the decarbonisation of activities taking place in society.

2. 'Handprint' - promoting and amplifying positive impacts

We demonstrate our hands-on commitment to environmental and social progress within the PR industry and in collaboration with our clients. In terms of equity, innovative work practices, and a progressive, inclusive workplace culture, we lead the way both through our own activities and the consulting services we offer to our clients.

3. 'Brainprint' - building up and disseminating the right knowledge

Knowledge exchange and continuing education are drivers of transformation. As agencies, we recognise our role in challenging assumptions, sparking change, and pushing for the adoption of novel solutions. By networking with experts from other sectors, we increase our knowledge of sustainability within our own, respective markets, and in others', and pass this knowledge on.

WE TAKE RESPONSIBILITY

As communications experts, we are taking the lead in developing sustainability at organisations and in society as a whole. We are "walking the talk", starting with ourselves: we bear an obligation within the industry to push for sustainability, at agencies and enterprise firms. Our industry can exert a real, beneficial impact, even if it does not manufacture a tangible good.

Taken as a whole, the collective footprint of all members of the communications industry, along with that of national and international associations, is substantial, mandating the need for us to act.

The ICCO, together with other international organisations, seeks to set quality standards for sustainability communication, define a carbon footprint assessment for the communications industry, and benchmark the sustainability of our sector in a comprehensible and transparent way.

We are working to improve the environment and society in our own activities and in our client work. Some concrete milestones include decreasing unavoidable emissions, avoiding new sources of emissions, and advancing diversity and equality in the workplace and beyond.

Through knowledge exchange in the field of sustainability, we are actively working to assist the long-term structural transformation of our economy and society.

In the spirit of a long-term and forward-thinking working relationship, we expect our existing clients and customers, and those with whom we may work in the future, to acknowledge the problems posed by social issues like climate change, and to contribute to their solution.

It is recommended that all professional PR service providers, and by extension all ICCO members and their member organisations, develop their own guidelines for their agencies, and for the businesses and institutions with which they work. In keeping with the spirit of this Sustainability Charter, they should decline clients, commissions, or projects that are blatantly at odds with the fulfilment of national and international climate objectives.

PROFESSIONAL SUSTAINABILITY COMMUNICATION FOR PROMOTING THE ECOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION

In addition to complying with legal requirements as a matter of course, we are committed to adhering to this Communication Code and other associated ICCO standards in the fields of business ethics.

Our decades of experience in PR and communications are being leveraged to communicate complex social issues, such as climate change. Communicating sustainability in a qualitative and factual way is an exceptional challenge.

Creating a positive environmental and social impact while building public trust in the communications industry as a driver for positive change, is a crucial element of our mission. Our aim is to convince our audience through what we do best: reducing a subject's complexity, educating, and managing issues in a transparent and ethical way.

ACHIEVING UNDERSTANDING. CREATING AWARENESS AND ACCEPTANCE. COMMUNICATING PUBLICLY, BUT ALSO INTERNALLY WITHIN COMPANIES, INSTITUTIONS AND PUBLIC BODIES.

As consultants and communications specialists, we view sustainability as an essential element within an ongoing process, in which we see our role as a sounding board and resource. On this continuous journey, we aim to provide both pushback and inspiration. We point out possibilities and take the opportunity to

initiate, navigate and illuminate. Our objective is to show our clients and other members of the sector the way forward, to break new ground, or speed up the process.

Our advocacy is a serious undertaking, something which entails being frank with a client if they are taking a wrong turn, or are on the wrong path entirely. Not only is it our duty to support clients in achieving their objectives, but also to manage their exposure to risks without ignoring the public interest.

CREDIBLE SOURCES: HOW WE DEPEND ON TRANSPARENCY AND FACTS

We communicate in a credible and fact-based way, providing evidence for our assertions, and understand that transparency is the guiding principle for communicating about sustainability. Greenwashing has no place in what we do, or how we see ourselves.

A robust knowledge base is the prerequisite for a factual dialogue. That's why every ICCO member endeavours to gather information on environmental science in an organised way and analyses it thoroughly. This should hold true for an agency's own data as well as in its collaborative efforts with clients.

Our remit includes establishing guidelines, training, and public outreach toward that end.

Access to knowledge is the key to transformation. One current obstacle to this is the lack of binding definitions and standards for "sustainability communication" within the industry.

Likewise, sustainability consulting and the knowledge it encompasses are vague notions. Today, anyone can call themselves a "PR consultant" or a "sustainability expert". Thus industry organisations must take on the responsibility of creating common standards, training and quality certification programmes that guide clients, employees and members, for the purpose of engendering public trust.

Via this charter, we have set out to define sustainability communication guidelines, which ICCO members shall commit themselves to. Moreover, this document is a framework for the entire communications industry as well as its partners and clients.

Moreover, we are in the process of developing international training and certification programmes. In collaboration with sustainability experts, we have devised a "Certified Sustainability Communications Expert" course, which will be integrated into our members' audits and quality certifications.

ICCO'S PRINCIPLES OF SUSTAINABILITY COMMUNICATION (IN SUMMARY)

1. Transparency: ICCO members agree to communicate honestly, openly and transparently on all aspects of sustainability. They challenge information provided to them by their clients, make sure communication on such issues is truthful and factual, and communicate scientific findings in a way that the general public can comprehend.

2. **Rooted in science:** ICCO members pledge only to use data which is well-rooted in science, citing their sources, particularly in regards environmental topics, to prevent the spread of false or misleading information. They shall also participate in and support industry initiatives that shine a light on the spread of disinformation, and the efforts to eradicate it.
3. **Dialogue-oriented:** ICCO members shall endeavour to initiate constructive dialogue between those with diverging viewpoints, at companies and in institutions, in public bodies, in the media, and throughout civil society.
4. **Responsible communications, minus greenwashing:** All members of ICCO, including companies, institutions, agencies, networks or individual consultants must take statements on sustainability issues into careful consideration, making sure they are factual and scientifically sound, thus suitable for communicating to the public. All PR experts and communication consultants who advise or actively communicate on sustainability issues shall ensure to the best of their knowledge and belief that sustainability communication is not misused for the green- or whitewashing of an issue.

Members of ICCO and their clients and suppliers shall not give the impression that the PR and communications industry promotes greenwashing activities for themselves or for the benefit of their clients.

5. **Experienced consulting:** ICCO members understand that public reporting, transformation, strategy and communications consulting in connection with climate protection and sustainability require specialised expertise that goes far beyond classic PR and communications consulting. Through specialised training and collaboration, we, as consultants and public communicators, ensure that clients receive the necessary, robust level of expertise for all consulting and PR services.

In this context, ICCO recommends the inclusion of dedicated sustainability experts for all member organisations. Climate protection and sustainability expertise and competencies are developed through special education, training and certification programmes, and through cooperation with recognised experts.

The text of this document for ICCO has been developed by the Austrian Public Relations Organisation (PRVA) for potential adoption as an international industry standard.

Its content is based on, among other sources, regional working group results, the Charter of the Climate Journalism Network in Germany, the Climate Code of the Climate Journalism Network Austria, Guidelines for the Editorial Treatment of the Climate Crisis, and GPRAs (Germany) position paper on the subject, as well as on recommendations from IPRA and other national and international PR and communications associations.