

Understanding Sustainable Behaviour

**Consumer insights as the missing
link between positive impact
and profitable business**

Durk Bosma

To Abel and Max. It's for you two that I try to leave
the world in a slightly better shape.

Colofon

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Influencing Behaviour for the Better

There is good news: behaviour can be influenced for the better, but it requires the right mix of tools. Communication, product development, pricing and incentives, choice architecture, and policy each play their role. The most effective interventions combine these tools, aligning sustainability with existing values and removing the sense of compromise.

Marketers, more than any other professional group, are specialists in changing behaviour. Decades of practice have trained them to understand what captures attention, what motivates action, and what turns a lingering intention into a concrete choice. They know how to remove friction, how to frame benefits in ways that feel immediate and personal, and how to design products, messages and experiences that fit effortlessly into people's lives. And they control the means to do it.

In the sustainability arena, this behavioural expertise is invaluable. While policy makers craft regulations and innovators build new solutions, it is marketers who hold the tools to translate those solutions into everyday habits. In many ways, the transition to sustainable behaviour is not a technological challenge, but a behavioural one. And it is marketers, with their toolbox of behavioural influence, who are best positioned to turn sustainable intentions into real-world action. They are uniquely equipped for this moment. No other discipline understands as deeply:

- how people make decisions,
- which values shape preference,
- how to reduce friction at the moment of choice,
- how to frame benefits so they feel immediate rather than distant,
- and how to design products, messages and environments that stimulate new behaviour.

If sustainability is ultimately a behavioural challenge, then marketing is central to solving it.

But why should marketers care so deeply about sustainability? The answer is simple: sustainability is becoming a core driver of market dynamics in many industries, yet influencing sustainable behaviour is far more difficult than influencing traditional purchase decisions.

Sustainability is one of the biggest opportunities in modern marketing. Marketers should care about sustainability because consumers increasingly expect brands to contribute to solutions. In many industries, successful sustainable brands are outperforming their peers.

And there's another reason: purpose attracts talent. Companies are not embracing sustainability only because clients demand it. Many do so because people want to work on things that matter. Young professionals prefer contributing to companies that take their societal role seriously. Having a strong purpose is therefore a talent strategy.

2.1 What is sustainable marketing?

In the past decades we have seen a shift in how marketers adopt sustainability goals in their thinking. I will demonstrate the change using just two arrows.

Before we started worrying about our planet, marketing and sustainability were opposite forces. When marketing was successful, this was basically bad news for the planet. The goal of marketing was to increase consumption, which led to the increase of sales. And selling more products led to more pollution, use of scarce resources etc. While the world was living under the assumption that resources were infinite, this wasn't really an issue. Fast fashion is perhaps the clearest example of the old marketing logic: the better brands became at creating desire for newness, the more successful they were commercially, and the worse the consequences became for waste, emissions, labour conditions and resource use.

To put it simply, the relationship between marketing and sustainability used to look like this:



But then the world started to see the negative side-effects of consumption. This led to a higher awareness of the fact that we needed to take better care of our planet. And this awareness triggered all kinds of initiatives, mostly in the supply chain, to do better. Or at least less harm. But there was little interaction between marketing and sustainability. It was two worlds apart. The book *'The Great Fight'* about Unilever's former CEO Paul Polman's (more on him later) struggle to get sustainability implemented in the core of thinking within Unilever, offers a perfect illustration of this. Throughout the years the company had launched an endless stream of sustainability initiatives, but Unilever consistently failed to achieve consumer preference based on these efforts. And this is basically bad news too. Because for a large company like Unilever in the end the shareholders largely decide what's on next year's agenda. And when sustainability does not lead to (short term) consumer preference for your products, it is merely a cost in

the eyes of most shareholders. When marketing and sustainability do not align, the chances of their goals conflicting increase.



The next leap in sustainable marketing happened when marketers started to realise they could win consumer preference by adding a sustainable cause to their product proposition. Products that are better for the world can sell better. Now this seems like good news (in most cases it is) but not always the case. What can happen is called window dressing.

An example is Dutch chocolate brand Tony's Chocolonely. Out of nowhere they became the biggest chocolate brand in the Netherlands. They very successfully leveraged their claim to solve underpayment in the supply chain ('slave-free chocolate'), a very noble, sympathetic and mediagenic cause. But one could ask oneself if a very unhealthy, imported product like chocolate can actually be very sustainable at all.

But this way of thinking about sustainability has positive effects. It increases awareness about the negative effects of producing and consuming a certain product. And when competitors see that a brand is successful with a sustainability claim, they will follow, as has happened in the chocolate industry. The arrows point in the same direction, supporting each other, like this:



The next step happened when companies started seeing their sustainability purpose as the end goal and not as a means to achieve marketing success.

This means they will use marketing to influence consumer choice, to seduce consumers into making sustainable choices. But the end goal isn't commercial success, it's positive impact. Marketing is a way to achieve this. This is what 'new era' companies like Livekindly or The Vegetarian Butcher are aiming for. Many idealistic start-ups also prioritise impact this way. If they successfully market a product that is more sustainable than an alternative product, being successful at marketing means society as a whole benefits.



This only works if the core purpose of the company is to improve the world. Otherwise, shareholders or other owners will always be inclined to make decisions that will benefit them. But particularly newly established companies often put planet before profit in their priorities. Luckily this becomes more and more the norm.

2.2 But the purpose of purpose is purpose

The previous paragraphs shows that the idea of 'purpose' has become increasingly prominent in marketing, but opinions still differ on how central it should be to brand and business strategy. Some marketers still view purpose-driven activities with caution, seeing them as something that can easily drift into abstraction or distract from commercial realities. This reflects an earlier mindset in which societal and environmental considerations were largely treated as separate from the core business. They believe a 'purpose' should only be adhered to if it serves a commercial goal. Unfortunately there is no guarantee that it does.

Today, however, the environment in which brands operate has changed. Sustainability, regulatory developments, shifting consumer expectations, and talent dynamics all make it increasingly important for organisations to articulate how

they contribute to society. Purpose is therefore no longer only a moral ambition or a marketing gimmick; it can act as a practical driver of long-term relevance and resilience. When clearly defined and credibly delivered, purpose helps clarify the value an organisation aims to create for people who use their products or services, for their own business, and for the wider world.

Marketing commentator Mark Ritson captures the essence of this perspective with a concise observation: *'the purpose of purpose is purpose'*¹¹. His point is that purpose should be an end goal, a reason for existence. And it only works as a marketing tool when it is genuine and aligned with what the organisation actually does and not when it is treated as a superficial branding exercise or a shortcut to commercial gain. Purpose becomes ineffective when it is bolted on, overly idealistic, or disconnected from business reality.

For marketers, this means purpose is most effective when it complements the fundamentals of good marketing. Communication works best when it connects purpose to values consumers already prioritise in their decisions: taste, convenience, health, identity, or well-being. Purpose can help shape these decisions, but it should not overshadow the basic drivers of category choice.

Ultimately, authenticity is essential. When a company's actions and its stated purpose align, purpose can build trust and strengthen the brand's position. When the two diverge, purpose quickly loses credibility. Purpose is therefore most effective when it is grounded in real impact and embedded in daily decision-making, rather than positioned as a stand-alone marketing theme.

The strongest examples are brands whose purpose is not invented by the marketing department but visible in what they make, what they refuse to do and how they organise the business. Patagonia's commitment to protecting the planet, Tony's Chocolonely's ambition to end exploitation in cocoa, and Lego's mission to inspire the builders of tomorrow all work because the purpose is directly connected to the product, the operating model and the choices consumers already understand. In these cases, purpose is not a parallel story layered on top of the brand; it is the reason for existence for the brand itself.

¹¹ <https://t.ly/vbofq>

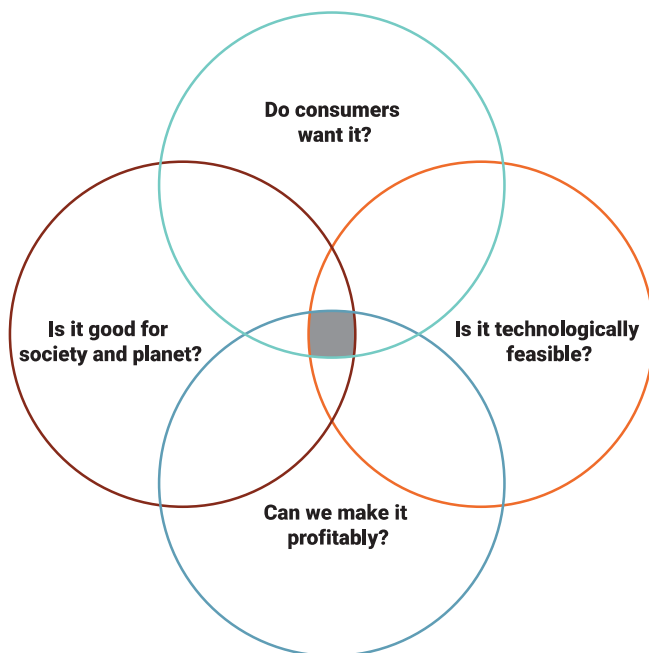
2.3 The need for consumer understanding

The Becel case illustrates with painful clarity what happens when brands misunderstand the people they rely on. Becel, a Dutch margarine and cooking oil brand, had long been associated with health, familiarity and a certain down-to-earth pragmatism. Its loyal buyers were older, more traditional consumers who valued the brand for its role in heart health and everyday use. When the company attempted to reposition itself within the fast-growing plant-based movement, it launched the slogan **'Plants are the new cows'**, a line that may have appealed to progressive consumers who already embraced plant-based eating, but clashed directly with the world view of Becel's core audience.

For these buyers, cows are not symbols of climate burdens but icons of Dutch rural identity. The suggestion that 'cows should be replaced' felt jarring, even disrespectful. Meanwhile, the consumers who *did* resonate with the slogan, young progressives, did not consider Becel a relevant or aspirational brand in the first place. They were already using plant-based dairy alternatives from small, activist brands. As a result, the campaign resonated with no one. After only three weeks, it was pulled from the market. A costly failure, not because the idea of plant-based food is wrong, but because Becel's understanding of their consumers missed the mark. The campaign reflected the aspirations of the organisation, not the mindset of the people who actually buy the product.

Four circles

This is exactly why future-proof brand building, and sustainable innovation in particular, requires a structured way of thinking about what makes a proposition viable. A helpful way to approach this is through a Venn diagram with four overlapping circles that together determine whether an idea can succeed: **technological feasibility, financial feasibility, societal impact, and consumer demand**. Only where these four areas overlap does a resilient, scalable, future-proof business case emerge.



1. Technological feasibility

This circle defines what is technically possible: Can we produce this product reliably, safely and at the quality users expect? In the case of plant-based spreads, the technology clearly exists. But in many other domains, think of cultivated meat, precision fermentation, or upcycled ingredients, technology is still emerging, costly or unstable at scale. If a technology cannot yet deliver on taste, texture, shelf life or production volume, no amount of consumer enthusiasm or sustainability benefit will compensate. Technological feasibility is the foundation: without it, the rest collapses.

2. Financial feasibility

Even if something is technically possible, it must also be financially sensible. Can the product be manufactured and sold at a price consumers are actually willing to pay? Will volume eventually bring down costs? Can the business model sustain itself without endless subsidies or inflated premiums? Many sustainable innovations struggle here: algae ingredients, climate-friendly fertilizers and cer-

tain forms of alternative protein are scientifically promising but too expensive for mainstream adoption. Understanding consumers is essential at this stage. Their willingness to pay defines the upper limit of the retail price. Their usage patterns determine your cost-to-serve. Their expectations determine how much R&D investment is required before the product feels 'good enough.' A business case is not financially sound until it is grounded in real consumer behaviour.

3. Societal impact

This circle covers the *actual* ecological and social footprint of a solution: carbon emissions, biodiversity, water use, labour conditions, public health effects. Societal impact is not the same as consumer perception, but it does shape long-term legitimacy, retailer acceptance and investor interest. Measuring the long-term societal contribution of an initiative is no easy task.

4. Consumer demand

Finally, there is the circle that ultimately determines whether everything else matters: **Do people want it?** Not in theory, not in a survey, but at the shelf. Do they choose it when it competes with familiar and convenient alternatives? Consumers choose based on taste, price, convenience and identity long before sustainability enters the equation. If the future-proof option does not satisfy these primary drivers, it will remain niche.

If you work in a BTB environment, you may think the last circle doesn't apply to you, that it's your customer's responsibility. But even when your customers are not the end users, their needs must still be taken into account. If you develop an ingredient that consumers ultimately reject, your customers will not incorporate it into their products. The same logic applies to your direct (business) customers: their requirements, work flows, and constraints shape what is feasible. Your solution must offer a clear improvement over what they currently use, technically, practically, or economically. That means understanding how they work today, where the frictions lie, and what would genuinely make their lives easier.

Putting the four circles together

Where the four circles overlap lies the only space where sustainable innovation can truly scale:

- **Technologically feasible** → It can be made reliably.
- **Financially feasible** → It can be produced and sold at a viable margin.
- **Societally impactful** → It genuinely contributes to a better world.
- **Consumer-desired** → People will willingly choose it.

If one circle is missing, the model breaks:

- Missing *technology* → the idea stays in the lab.
- Missing *financials* → the cost base collapses under its own weight.
- Missing *impact* → the product becomes superficial or misleading.
- Missing *consumer demand* → money is wasted on a product no one buys.

The Becel case shows what happens when the consumer circle is misunderstood. And many sustainability innovations fail because the financial circle or perception-vs-impact gap is ignored. In contrast, the most resilient future-proof winners, like battery swap services for e-motorcycles in African cities, and the rise of repair services, sit firmly in the intersection of all four circles.

2.4 Policy making is marketing too

Policies, guidelines and regulations ultimately require awareness, trust, support and changed behaviour¹² to be successful. They will have the highest chance to succeed when they follow the same behavioural principles that good marketers use: understand what people do today, why they do it, and which levers (motivation, ability and prompts) can realistically shift them. Communication is just as crucial as the intervention itself; people must understand what is expected of them and why it matters.

¹² There are also plenty of policies whose main goal is to keep the status quo comfortably in place. Add a lane to a motorway, and the message is essentially: "Don't worry, nobody has to change a thing. Just keep driving." It is behaviour-change policy for people who would rather not change their behaviour. Fortunately, most governments are, very slowly, beginning to loosen our grip on that way of thinking.

There is, however, one important difference: policy often aims to steer people away from behaviours they find appealing (like smoking, driving fast, or eating meat), whereas marketing typically introduces or promotes something attractive. Yet the toolbox is the same. Whether the goal is to encourage uptake or discourage certain behaviours, change only happens when interventions match human psychology and make the desired behaviour feel easier, more rewarding, or more normal than the alternative.

2.5 Why ‘future-proof’ is a better framing than ‘sustainable’

Language matters. And the term *sustainable* has become a victim of its own ‘success’. In the 1990s and 2000s, it was fresh, aspirational, and most importantly: mobilising. But decades of overuse and misuse have eroded its meaning. Today, *sustainable* can be found on everything from plastic bottles to bank accounts, from hamburgers to holidays. The meaning of the word has become so elastic that in many contexts it means nothing at all.

When people are asked ‘would you prefer a sustainable product?’, almost everyone says yes. But when asked ‘what does sustainable mean to you?’, the answers scatter: some think of the environment, others of fairness, others of durability. This vagueness makes it an unhelpful guide for behaviour change.

That is why I prefer the term *future-proof*¹³. It is sharper and more concrete. What do I mean by it:

Future-proof behaviour is behaviour that does not compromise the quality of life in the future.

¹³ *Being researchers, we obviously tested this alternative phrasing against the term ‘sustainable’. The conclusions from this little study in brief. The two concepts largely overlap in meaning, but there are nuances. ‘Sustainable’ is indeed mainly associated with environment and climate and to a lesser extent with fairness. Future-proof is mostly associated with ‘things that last’.*

As one participant put it: “The words mean roughly the same thing, but when I think of sustainable, I think of climate more than future-proof. That comes from the use in the media I think. ‘Future-proof’ is also used in a more neutral form, for example when a bridge or quay is renovated and can last for years again and is therefore future-proof again.”

It means we can keep doing what we do. The phrase evokes a sense of resilience, continuity, and pragmatism. It speaks to parents who want a liveable world for their children, to businesses that want long-term stability, and to citizens who want to feel secure. Unlike *sustainable*, it does not come with the moral fatigue of endless appeals to 'do good'. It focuses instead on safeguarding what we already value.

Another advantage of the term *future-proof* is that it naturally opens the door to include **financial sustainability** in the definition of sustainable behaviour. Future-proof behaviour is not only about safeguarding the planet, but also about ensuring that the choices we promote make sense in the long run for anyone involved: consumers, companies, and governments. As we've seen earlier in this chapter, behaviour that is environmentally positive but financially fragile will never scale. Future-proof behaviour requires business models that can stand on their own feet, rather than relying indefinitely on subsidies or affluent niche segments. Using the term *future-proof* helps emphasise this broader perspective: that the transition must work not only for the planet, but also for people's wallets, for companies' long-term viability, and for governments' budgets. This makes the concept more concrete, actionable, and appealing across society.

For the sake of clarity, I will use the words sustainable and future-proof as synonyms throughout this book. When I write about sustainable behaviour, I mean behaviour that is future-proof; and when I write about future-proof behaviour, I mean behaviour that is sustainable in the broad sense described here. The two terms may carry slightly different associations, but in this book they point to the same underlying idea: choices that people, businesses and societies can continue making without undermining quality of life over time.

2.6 Take-aways

Sustainable behaviour spreads when future-proof choices are designed, priced, framed and made available in ways that fit how people already decide. This chapter showed that sustainable marketing requires aligning technological feasibility, financial viability, real societal impact with genuine consumer needs.

For marketers, joining the sustainability movement is no longer optional. Some will do so because they are intrinsically motivated: they genuinely want to use their skills to help create a better future. Others will be pulled in by external forces: regulation, investor expectations, changing consumer norms, retailer demands or employer pressure. But whether the motivation is intrinsic or extrinsic, the direction is the same. Marketing can either help accelerate the transition to future-proof behaviour, or it can become one of the forces holding it back.

In the next chapter, The Toolbox of Influence, we explore the practical tools to do exactly that. We'll explore the levers available to marketers, innovators and policy makers: communication, product design, pricing and incentives, choice architecture and policy. Tools they have been using for decades and which now can be used to change behaviour for the better.