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Communicating Food Sustainability to Consumers

Case Study: Rainforest Alliance



This case study is based on an interview with Rainforest Alliance, along with publicly available information. The information in this case study does not necessarily reflect the views of UNEP, WWF or GlobeScan but aims to highlight and explain the approach of Rainforest Alliance in communicating food sustainability to consumers.

Rainforest Alliance is an international non-profit organisation aiming to create a more sustainable world by using social and market forces to protect nature and improve the lives of farmers and forest communities, promote their human rights, and help them mitigate and adapt to the climate crisis. Products are labelled as Rainforest Alliance certified with its “little green frog seal” if they meet the organisation’s Sustainable Agriculture Standard. The Rainforest Alliance seal and certification programme covers coffee, cocoa, tea, bananas, and other commodity sectors facing urgent environmental and social challenges.

Objectives

The objective of Rainforest Alliance’s consumer-facing communications is to help consumers make positive choices by providing pragmatic and easy solutions, driving a more sustainable market for certified products. Rainforest Alliance aims to build awareness, support and an understanding among consumers that Rainforest Alliance certification is not just a seal on products, but that it indicates positive impact.

Approach

Scope and Label

The Rainforest Alliance (RA) certification label indicates that the participating farm, forest community, or business has been audited by a third-party auditor against specific sustainability standards based on the “triple bottom line”: environmental, economic, and social well-being. RA sustainability standards focus on the following themes:

- Promoting best practices for conserving forests, including protecting standing and native forests, and fostering the ecological health of trees, soils, and waterways.
- Promoting responsible land management methods that increase carbon storage while avoiding deforestation.
- Strategies for assessing and addressing human rights abuses (e.g., child labour, forced labour, poor working conditions, etc.).

- Improving sustainable livelihood opportunities for smallholder farmers and forest communities.

Currently, more than two million farmers are certified under Rainforest Alliance's agriculture standards in 70 countries across the globe.

Displaying the seal on a product indicates the presence of a crop that has been grown in accordance with the Rainforest Alliance Sustainable Agriculture Standards.

The label includes the words "Rainforest Alliance, People & Nature" around the picture of a small green tree frog. This version of the label was launched in 2020, following the merger of Rainforest Alliance with UTZ (a Netherlands-based back-of-pack sustainable farming certification). The new version of the label is designed to emphasise the importance of both social and environmental sustainability. The organisation found previously that, due to the image of the frog, coupled with the word "rainforest" in its name, consumers tended to associate the seal with environmental impact rather than social outcomes. The new wording on the seal aims to shift this perception.

Apart from its certification scheme, Rainforest Alliance develops and implements long-term conservation and community development programs in a number of important tropical landscapes. Rainforest Alliance also advocates for far-reaching policies that support rural producers with governments and companies.

Channels and Audiences

The Rainforest Alliance seal is displayed on the packaging of products containing certified ingredients. The label can be found on agricultural products (e.g., coffee, cocoa, bananas and tea) and forestry products (e.g., paper and cardboard packaging). The label's position on the pack varies depending on the brand using the seal. In some cases the Rainforest Alliance seal is displayed prominently on the front-of-pack, while for some other products, the label is on the side or back of the packaging. The RA seal can also be used by certified tourism businesses, for example hotels and tour operators.

Promotion of the seal has historically relied on Rainforest Alliance's 'seal partners' – the businesses that display the Rainforest Alliance certification on packaging. In recent years, the organisation has started to communicate more with consumers directly, often using social media and digital channels, sharing news from the organisation, celebrating achievements, and raising awareness of relevant social and environmental issues. The Rainforest Alliance website offers information for both consumers and businesses, including the work that the organisation is doing around the world, thought leadership pieces for interested readers, and tips for living more sustainably.

Rainforest Alliance targets different consumers through different digital channels. Its own media platforms, such as its website and social media pages, are more often used for thought leadership pieces offering deeper engagement and are more technical in nature. This is because these channels are most often accessed by more engaged consumers and other stakeholders who require more detail.

On all media platforms, Rainforest Alliance aims to engage with consumers on the Rainforest Alliance mission and vision at large. As well as posts informing consumers about the Rainforest Alliance certification program and landscape programs, communications also aim to help stakeholders, including consumers, to understand the challenges to forest conservation and sustainable agriculture production and how different actors (consumers, companies, civil society, governments) can each play their part to overcome these challenges.

Alternatively, on paid or earned social media channels (for example, on influencer social channels), the focus is more on high-level communication for the average consumer, promoting easy steps that everyone can take to be part of the solution such as looking for the green frog on products when shopping. In 2021, the organisation sent complementary 'goody' boxes of various certified products to social media influencers, who opened them online and introduced followers to their search for the green frog seal in stores.

Messaging and Campaigns

Rainforest Alliance messaging aims to convey pragmatic, easy solutions, and positivity.

Communication messages are fairly consistent in its primary consumer markets (the US, UK, Netherlands, and Germany) but these vary somewhat from the messaging used in 'producing' markets, including Mexico, Brazil and Indonesia. The key difference is from helping people and the environment in other countries to helping producers in your own country. The message in these countries is more about domestic pride and ensuring economic growth to lift everyone by buying locally produced goods.

While producer markets have not been a target for Rainforest Alliance traditionally, there is a growing middle class of consumers buying certified products in these countries, which the organisation hopes to tap into in the future.

Rainforest Alliance runs a global “Follow the Frog” campaign once a year, during which it encourages its commercial partners to help amplify the campaign. The campaign is designed to raise awareness of product sustainability and provides practical tips to support people to live more sustainably, including encouraging consumers to look for the Rainforest Alliance seal when shopping.

Rainforest Alliance’s [“Follow the Frog”](#) video advert became a viral hit in the early 2010s and has attracted 5.7 million views on youtube. The humorous, visually compelling cinematic-style video recognised and reflected the fact that many people are already trying to live a positive life, while highlighting “follow the frog” as a simple action that people can take to help live up to their values. Rainforest Alliance believes that this campaign worked well because it acknowledged that consumers want to do the right thing but are confused about how to act.

Partnerships

Rainforest Alliance works with over 5,000 businesses and partners with brands on B2B2C campaigns. In most cases, the organisations work together to tell a story and the brand or retailer creates the communication assets that will reach the consumer.

For example, McDonald’s launched a campaign in 2020 to celebrate certifying all of its McCafé coffee beans with Rainforest Alliance, which included TV advertising in several developed country markets including Canada and the UK. Costa Coffee in the UK has sourced 100% Rainforest Alliance coffee beans for over 13 years and produces video content each year to celebrate the partnership with RA, in particular aiming to engage and educate its employees.

Measuring Success

According to consumer research by Ipsos on behalf of Rainforest Alliance in 2021, prompted consumer recall of the organisation in its key markets ranges from 50% in the UK, 23% in the Netherlands, 28% in the US and 26% in Germany. Between 44% and 65% of people agree that they would be more likely to trust a product with the Rainforest Alliance certification over one without it.

Rainforest Alliance certified products are available in more than 100 countries and the organisation reports a combined total of 1.7 million social media followers and 180,000 newsletter subscribers. Sales of both Rainforest Alliance and UTZ certified coffee has risen in the last few years: the UTZ certification program has increased 94 percent in sales since 2017, whereas the Rainforest Alliance program has increased 44 percent since 2017. Many factors affect sales, including the quantity of produce certified and the brands choosing to display the label. The trends in sales of certified commodities including coffee, cocoa, banana and tea can be found on the Rainforest Alliance website.

According to Rainforest Alliance, the 2021 “Follow the Frog” campaign saw an overall reach on social media of 16.1 million people (up from 12.8 million people in 2020) across 94 countries.

Challenges

Consumer understanding and a potential lack of differentiation presents a challenge for Rainforest Alliance, in particular given the number of different ecolabels currently on the market. In the coffee segment, for example, Rainforest Alliance says that three quarters of the products sold in Western Europe are certified to a sustainability standard, making it difficult for any one ecolabel to stand out and add value to a product. Compounding this, a focus on B2B2C communications traditionally has meant that Rainforest Alliance’s brand positioning has been influenced by its commercial partners, potentially limiting the understanding of consumers as to what the seal really represents.

Rainforest Alliance notes that more work is needed to build consumer understanding of what its certification stands for and to encourage “brand love”. This will also help to ensure that the Rainforest Alliance seal differentiates products and adds value for the brands that display it.

Guidelines

Rainforest Alliance produces its own [Labelling and Trademarks Policy](#) guidance for partners to ensure that its seal is used in a credible way.

Internally, the organisation has guidelines that specify how its brand is to be portrayed and its in-house creative team are responsible for ensuring consistency and credibility of communication.

Looking Ahead

Rainforest Alliance aims to represent a better choice for consumers. Currently, the organisation does this by certifying that one of the ingredients of a product was sustainably grown.

Ultimately, looking forward the organisation would like to explore broader ways to demonstrate a better choice and a positive impact to consumers, beyond a single certified ingredient. For example by reassuring consumers about the packaging of a product, in addition to its ingredients. This is a long-term ambition, however, and there are no imminent plans to broaden the scope of the Rainforest Alliance certification.