



# Communicating Food Sustainability to Consumers

## Case Study: Unilever



*This case study is based on an interview with Sukru Dincer, Global VP Digital: Sustainable Choices, Thea Koning, External Affairs and Issue Manager Foods and Refreshment, and Sarah Sim Environmental Sustainability Programme Director at Unilever, 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 Unilever in communicating food sustainability to consumers.*

Unilever is a global consumer goods company with over 400 brands across beauty and personal care, food and refreshment and home care. Unilever products are sold in over 190 countries around the world and the company turned over EUR 51 billion in 2020, 58% of which came from emerging markets. The company's purpose is to make sustainable living commonplace.

## Objectives

As part of Unilever's Compass Strategy, the company aims to "win with our brands as a force for good, powered by purpose and innovation". There are many goals that sit underneath this aspiration, as the company strives to create positive environmental, nutritional and social impact.

Within the Unilever goal to improve the health of the planet, there are three pillars: 1. Climate action, 2. Protect and regenerate nature and 3. Waste-free world. When it comes to climate action, Unilever's Climate Transition Action Plan (CTAP) (ref) sets out the steps the company will take to reduce emissions to zero within its own operations by 2030 and to net zero across its value chain by 2039.

These targets are supported by every part of the business. For example, the Foods and Refreshment Division communicated its Future Foods plan in 2020, which includes committing to an annual €1 billion sales target from plant-based meat and dairy alternatives within five to seven years.

Unilever believes that transparency about sustainability impacts will help inform consumer choices and accelerate progress against some big societal goals, such as the global race to net zero emissions. Practically, this means giving consumers the information they need to make more sustainable choices. Unilever notes there is often a gap between the importance people say they place on sustainability issues and their actions. The company aims to support people to bridge this attitudes-action gap by being transparent about its corporate goals as well as brand values and purpose. This will enable consumers to identify the brands whose values align with their own and engage in brand-driven behavioural change programmes.

In addition, Unilever recognises that product-level information may also be needed to help consumers make informed purchasing choices and potentially encourage positive behavioural change towards sustainable living. As part of the Unilever Compass, the company has an ambitious goal to halve the greenhouse gas impact of products across the

lifecycle by 2030, which will require significant consumer behaviour change. An additional aim is to share the carbon footprint of every Unilever product, although this goal does not currently have a publicly stated timeframe.

## Approach

Unilever has explored different ways of communicating about the sustainability of its brands and products to promote transparency, inform consumer choices and to enable consumer behaviour change towards more sustainable living.

The decision on which aspects of sustainability to communicate to consumers for each brand and product is driven by which stories the brand is trying to tell and what change the company is trying to encourage and enable. The company also monitors which issues are top-of-mind concerns for consumers and has found that climate change and plastics are currently very prominent topics. Knowing that many people are willing to commit to shifting their behaviour for sustainability reasons (including to lower their climate impact), but that most don't know where to start, Unilever aims to help overcome this by providing more solutions and information to consumers.

Unilever is piloting different approaches with several brands to understand how best to communicate sustainability impacts and issues in a way that consumers find meaningful and informative. Given high consumer interest in packaging (plastics) and climate, the company has tested or is planning to test a number of approaches in these areas (reduction claims (like less plastic or GHG emissions), or quantitative estimates like carbon footprint information). A broader range of environmental topics and impacts have also been explored by some brands through the use of storytelling (e.g. sustainable farming practices) and certification schemes (e.g. Rainforest Alliance, FSC, etc.).

Increasingly, score-based ecolabels are being developed in many markets. Unilever plans to explore the potential of these schemes to promote product transparency and consumer-relevant information. All these activities provide an opportunity to learn about the best way to communicate sustainability to consumers including how and where to share it (on pack vs online for example).

### Certification Labels

For many of Unilever's brands, third-party certification labels on product packaging play a role in storytelling about the source of ingredients and have done for many years. For example, the Ben & Jerrys brand prominently displays the international Fairtrade Mark on its ice cream products and uses the label to help it tell the consumer the story of where its cocoa comes from. On the Ben & Jerry's website there are numerous stories highlighting the experiences of farmers and the benefits of Fairtrade to them and their communities.

Unilever sees certifications that support its sustainable sourcing story as complementary to providing carbon footprint information and will continue to use both going forward, in addition to broader sustainability communications.

### Messaging & Behavioural Tactics

Unilever believes that sustainability communication needs to be simple, clear and meaningful to consumers in order to help them make better decisions. The company has found that information about the impact of products needs context in order to make it meaningful to people and that storytelling is an effective way of getting messages across.

Each Unilever brand tells its sustainability story in a different way based on its brand values. Knorr, for example, focuses on nutrition and cooking, Magnum ice-cream concentrates on pleasure and indulgence, while Ben & Jerry's takes a more activist approach.

The influence that a particular brand can have on people's behaviour and their choices is also an important factor. For example, Knorr – Unilever's biggest food brand - states its purpose is 'reinventing food for humanity': driving shifts towards more varied and plant-based diets that are better for the health of people and the planet. One of the ways Unilever does this is through Knorr's Future 50 Foods campaign, developed with WWF-UK. The campaign uses storytelling to encourage consumers to eat less meat and more plant-based ingredients, by explaining the impact that small changes can have and providing easy tips and recipes

In 2021, Knorr launched World Eat for Good Day to inspire consumers to make simple ingredient swaps to shake up meals to increase their nutritional value and reduce their environmental impact.

Another example of a Unilever brand seeking to influence consumer behaviour is Hellman's focus on preventing food waste. The brand has run several campaigns including 'Fridge Blindness' in Brazil, #SobraSabor in Argentina and #MixItUp in the UK, which offer ideas for turning leftovers into new meals using Hellman's products.

## Partnerships

Unilever has a long list of partnerships to help the company achieve its sustainability goals.

Regarding carbon footprinting, the company is creating partnerships with other businesses and organisations to try to standardise greenhouse gas data collection and sharing. For example, Unilever is part of the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) [Pathfinder project](#) with other businesses including Microsoft. Unilever is also working with businesses in its supply chain to understand and communicate its greenhouse gas footprints. Unilever believes that aligning data collection approaches and footprint calculation methodology is important to enable comparability of footprint results across ingredients, products and companies and to help educate consumers on what carbon footprinting means.

## Measuring Success

When it comes to measuring the effectiveness of food sustainability communications to consumers, Unilever is exploring a number of options.

The simplest measure of impact is the number of consumers that Unilever campaigns reach. The company has set numerous goals here, for example:

- Knorr has the ambition to get food that is good for people and the planet on 7 billion plates by 2025 through products, programmes and partnerships
- Hellmann's has the ambition to reach 100 million consumers a year with food waste awareness raising campaigns

Beyond measuring the reach of initiatives, Unilever has also conducted pilot studies to assess what works best to initiate consumer behaviour change:

- In the Netherlands, Unilever changed the back of pack recipes on meal kits to encourage the use of more vegetables and less meat. The company reports that this resulted in 31% of consumers choosing recipes with more vegetables, resulting in 2.9 million kg more vegetables being consumed.
- Also in the Netherlands, a joint campaign with retailer Albert Heijn and the Dutch national Postcode Lottery called Vegafavorieten provided almost 3 million households with a €12.50 gift voucher to cook a vegetarian dish based on a recipe booklet. A follow up consumer study showed that of the 38% of consumers who had heard of the campaign, 58% started eating more meat substitutes because of the campaign experience
- On food waste, Hellmann's has launched a programme to understand what drives consumers and how to best achieve behaviour change. One example from a study in Canada found that the introduction of a 'use-up day', making meals with ingredients already in the fridge and kitchen, led to 30% reduction in household food waste

## Challenges

According to Unilever, understanding whether and how the communication of sustainability impacts leads to better consumer choices and changes in behaviour is the key challenge in this space.

Strong scientific underpinnings are essential for measuring sustainability impacts in ways which allow for product differentiation. Only by showing the differences between particular products can this information influence consumer choices. If less accurate data (e.g. average data) show that impacts are similar for all products within a given product category, then this information will not be useful or meaningful to the consumer.

Furthermore, when considering environmental sustainability, and specific impact categories such as GHG emissions, there are challenges in making quantitative information (e.g. carbon footprint information) meaningful to consumers. Research suggests that climate change is a topic of great importance to many people around the world but often people are not connecting this with their own actions and consumption choices. Carbon literacy and more education in this area is needed to help bridge this gap. There will be similar education and information needs for other sustainability topics as well.

## Guidelines

All Unilever claims, including those focused on sustainability, are guided by the company's internal claims processes which ensure that all claims are credible, transparent and in line with legal requirements in the different markets in which the company operates.

## Looking Ahead

Unilever is actively exploring the most effective way to communicate to the consumer about the sustainability of products and the results of its current pilots (many of which are focused on environmental impacts) will be used to inform the approach going forward.

More consumer research needs to be conducted to help evaluate the effectiveness of various communication approaches such as storytelling, carbon footprints and ecolabelling schemes, and which of these is best at effecting consumer behavior change. As well as surveys that measure people's intentions, the company believes it will also need to involve in-market evaluation of communication and labelling pilots, so as to avoid a possible 'say-do gap' for consumers, i.e. if surveyed they say it will affect their behavior but in practice it may not, or other factors may affect their choices more.

Looking ahead, the company is committed to making the impacts of products more transparent to consumers; this is a key tenet of the Unilever Compass. There is potential to use carbon footprinting and/or carbon footprint-based claims (e.g. GHG reduction) as a starting point for broader transparency about product impacts in the future and more meaningful engagement with consumers to help drive lasting behaviour change.