



THE 'S' WORD

A BRAND'S GUIDE TO SUSTAINABILITY

Placing human understanding at the core
of your sustainability agenda

UNLIMITED

SUSTAINABILITY ON THE BRAIN

With the UK hitting record temperatures this summer and 'greenwashing' the number one buzzword for brands and consumers alike, widespread awareness around sustainability continues to grow. In fact, UNLIMITED's research reveals that 68% of UK consumers are already acting on living more sustainably, planning to do so, or thinking about it. People are concerned for the future of our planet and the world we are leaving for new generations. But is concern enough to drive change?

For brands, managing their sustainability story can be challenging. We know that every brand is on a journey and that it may feel too risky to take steps with potential reputational damage at stake, but evidence suggests that consumers are expectant for information.

Our **Human Understanding Lab's** recent study of UK consumers applied implicit neuroscience techniques, like reaction time testing, to delve below the surface of what people say and discover how they really feel about the 's' word. By building a deeper human understanding into our approach, we wanted to understand the true drivers of human behaviour around sustainability, what people are doing themselves and what they believe the role of brands should be.

Despite concerns or feelings of unease, we need to break down the tension among brands around communication of the 's' word. In this guide we offer you a place to start, sharing the consumer perspectives that brands need to inform their own sustainable comms journey.







PEOPLE APPEAR READY FOR SUSTAINABLE LIVING...

Our results suggest that many people in the UK are prepared to make sustainable changes and actively influence others.

Less than half of the people we surveyed (45%) pinned the responsibility to solve sustainability issues on 'others' – and only 18% thought this with any conviction (fast reaction time), which implies that over half of respondents feel a degree of personal responsibility. This is good news for brands – they can look to tap into the fact that most people are ready and willing.

...BUT NEED A POSITIVE NUDGE TO ACT

Our research shows that people care about environmental issues, but this isn't without nuance. 62% of people show conviction with a fast response when it comes to interest in living sustainably. However, according to our study, there is still some confusion among Brits around the benefits of sustainable living:

-  **How relevant is this?**
-  **How does it apply to me?**
-  **Does it really make a difference?**
-  **Will it genuinely benefit me and my family?**

There can be a gap between what people say, and what they actually do in regard to sustainability: this is known as the 'green gap', a trend that has been plaguing scientists and activists since the early 2000s.

Unsurprisingly, the overload of information and atmosphere of doom and gloom around the issue can leave consumers stressed, anxious, and unable to act. In fact, there is genuine proof that it pays to be positive. Behavioural science tells us that it is counterproductive to guilt-trip or punish non-sustainable behaviours. Scaremongering can leave us frozen rather than encouraging us to change our behaviour.

This is particularly true in circumstances when the negative information (in this case a barrage of apocalyptic doom and gloom in the media) goes against our past beliefs and priorities, creating a cognitive dissonance – a psychological discomfort which we seek to resolve by finding excuses. Human brains tend to repress uncomfortable feelings, mask them or turn them into something else.

We know that in order to make a real difference, we all need to be on the same wavelength when it comes to sustainability. So, it's time for a new approach to try and close the gap, a positive one driven by deeper human insight.

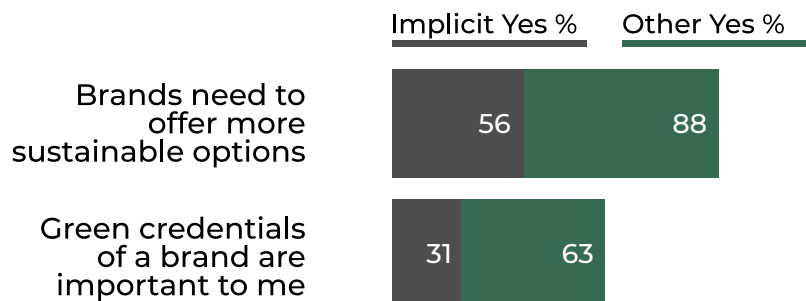
WHERE DO BRANDS COME IN?

The opportunity, as well as the challenge, for brands lies in the indication that their customers are more attracted to authentic sustainability promises.

Around two thirds of consumers agree that the 'green credentials of a brand are important', although only 31% agree with high emotional conviction. Those respondents who already live and breathe the 's' word show significantly higher levels of emotional conviction, and our key driver analysis found brand credentials to be their strongest driver of sustainable buying decisions, suggesting the major role that brands play here.

The people we surveyed seem more convinced that brands need to offer a larger variety of sustainability conscious options. There is an opportunity here to do better, to support your customers in their green lifestyles and to put proof around your own promises. A key way to do this? The right comms and messaging strategy – and you're right in thinking that this is something that UNLIMITED's expertise in human insight can help with.

People want brands to help them live sustainably



ONE STEP AT A TIME

Figuring out your sustainability agenda can feel like a minefield. To go beyond the superficiality of good optics, there needs to be a balance between showing the desire to change and the recognition that you may not be as far along on the journey as you would like.

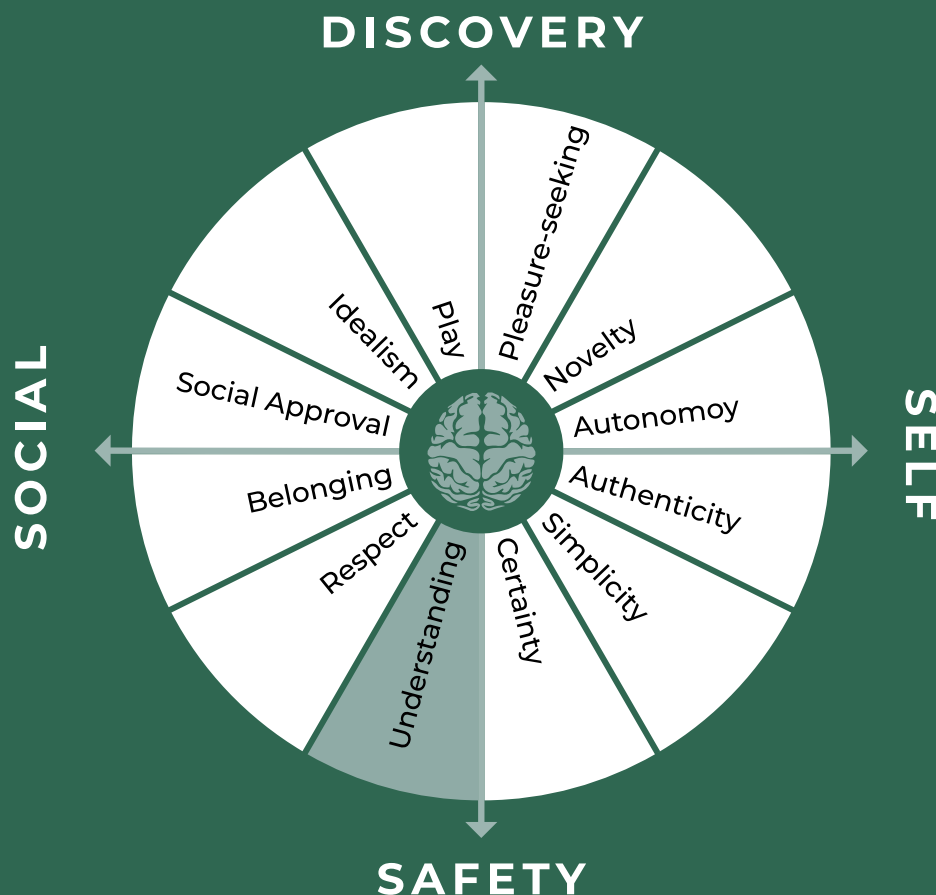
Brands need to consider the **HUMAN** impact of every decision in the long-term – and help consumers do the same. Following our six-step checklist is a great place to start.



1. COMMIT TO A POSITIVE APPROACH

It's time for an injection of optimism – brands need to take a stance that is driven by data, listens to and understands customers according to where they are in their sustainability journey, and uses behavioural science to analyse customer needs to work with them, rather than against them.

Just like the rest of us, consumers seek to feel recognised and supported in their efforts. Neuroscience tells us that feeling understood is a core human need. It activates neural regions previously associated with reward and social connection – a better place to build on for the behavioural change we are trying to unlock.



Our **Human Needs Model** confirms that a positive approach would have impact: humans are driven by a mix of underlying motives that tap into aspects of self-expression, group affiliation, discovery and safety. By understanding the motives behind specific behaviours, we can capitalise on what truly motivates consumers to more effectively communicate, drive action and meaningful change.

2. UNDERSTAND YOUR CUSTOMER SEGMENTS

Not everyone is on the same page when it comes to sustainability. This is why you need to understand the different customer journey segments to effectively communicate, engage, and work with them.

We've made this easier on you:

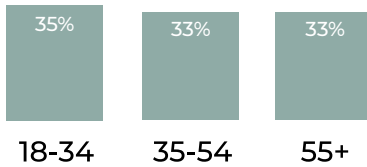
MEET THE
ADOPTERS, PLANNERS AND DENIERS



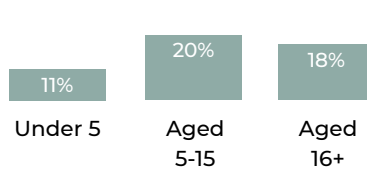
ADOPTERS & PLANNERS: WHO ARE THEY?

THE ADOPTERS

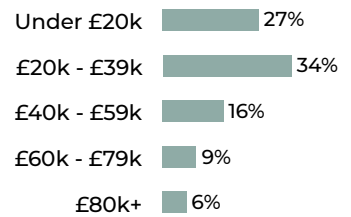
Age



Kids in household



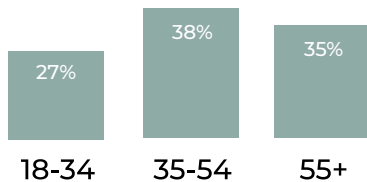
Household income



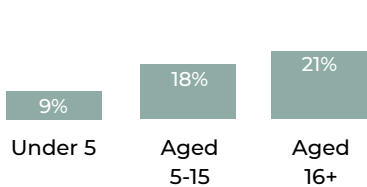
The Adopters represent 50% of the population. They are more likely to be female, to have younger children, earn a little more than the average, and lean to the left politically.

THE PLANNERS

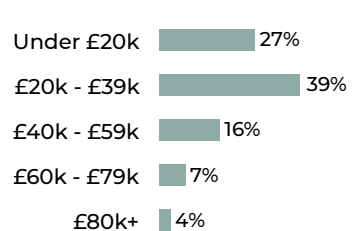
Age



Kids in household



Household income



The Planners are a smaller segment – only 18% of the population. They are similar to the Adopters, but more even in gender, and they skew a little older. They are also left leaning, but their household income is around average for the UK, which is a little lower than that of the Adopters.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR YOU?

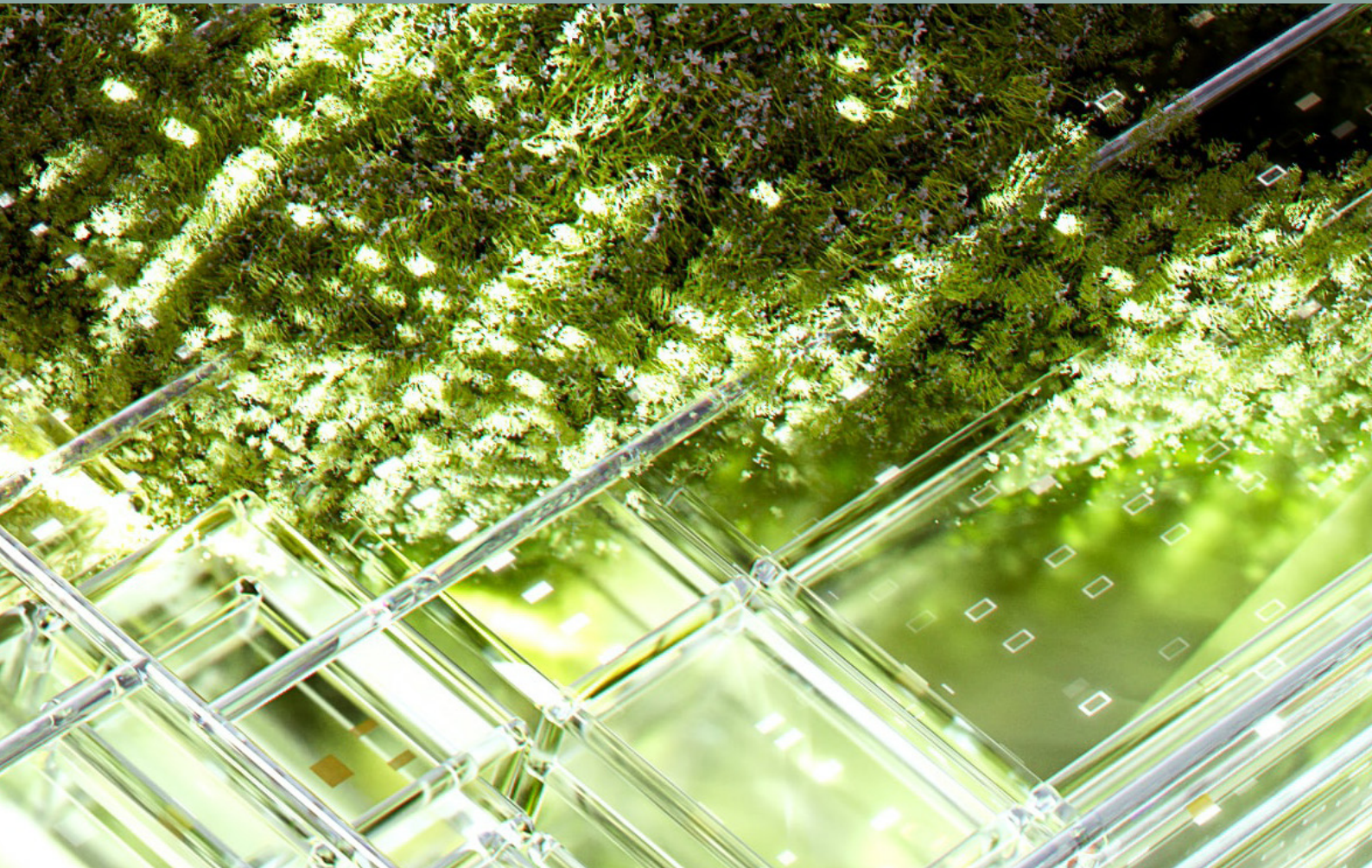
OUR CONSUMER RESEARCH SHOWS TWO KEY DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE PLANNERS AND ADOPTERS:

PLANNERS

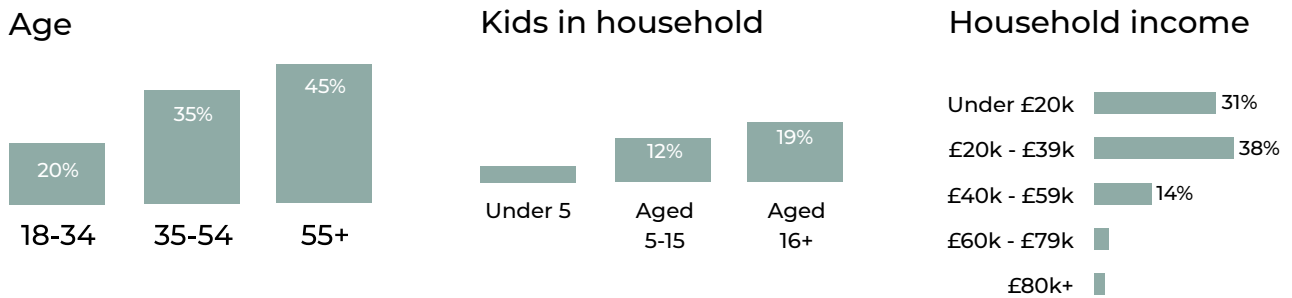
The Planners tend to feel that they need clearer information to live sustainably. This goes some way to explaining why members of this group are teetering on the brink of adopting more sustainable behaviours but have not done so yet. Not knowing what to do or where to start can leave people prone to inaction.

ADOPTERS

The Adopters are significantly more likely to have environmentally minded friends and family. This serves to normalise sustainable living. Behavioural science tells us that belonging is a basic human need; we learn how to think and behave like others in order to fit in and to avoid rejection, which has been shown to activate the same areas of the brain as physical pain.



DENIERS: WHO ARE THEY?



The Deniers differ demographically. They are more likely to be male, to have voted for Brexit, and skew older. Their average income is also lower.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR YOU?

This group is in need of some convincing. They are far more likely to believe that the importance of sustainability is being exaggerated compared to more significant issues. Just bombarding the Deniers with all manner of information may not work. In fact, to an uninterested and unengaged audience, it may feel a little like flogging a dead horse.

Brands need to tap into the Deniers' unease and gently help them understand the reality of climate change and its implications with a sensitive approach that focuses on topics close to their concerns and worries.



3. COVER ALL ANGLES

Looking at the different profiles of the three groups, it's clear that brands need to take a multi-layered, human-led approach to ensure that their sustainability strategy appeals to all and doesn't alienate loyal customers.

Again, we've done the hard work for you.

We recommend that brands develop a sustainability strategy that:

- 1. SUPPORTS THE ADOPTERS**
- 2. INFORMS THE PLANNERS**
- 3. ENGAGES THE DENIERS**



1. SUPPORT THE ADOPTERS

Adopters are already making many sustainable choices, particularly in retail and FMCG categories. To extend this behaviour into other categories, this group needs new and exciting green options, as well as authentic information about brands' commitment to the environment.

BRANDS THAT HAVE GOT IT RIGHT IN THE PAST:

SKY ZERO'S VISIONS OF THE FUTURE



MAKE A BETTER TOMORROW

IKEA'S EXCITING NEW WAYS TO BE MORE SUSTAINABLE



BUY BACK BETTER

2. INFORM THE PLANNERS

The Planners need visibility of all the options – a light touch approach that empathises with how difficult it can be to make changes might do the trick.

BRANDS THAT HAVE GOT IT RIGHT IN THE PAST:

QUORN'S HUMOROUS ALTERNATIVES



MAKE A SIMPLE SWAP

SAINSBURY'S 'TRY YOUR HALFEST'

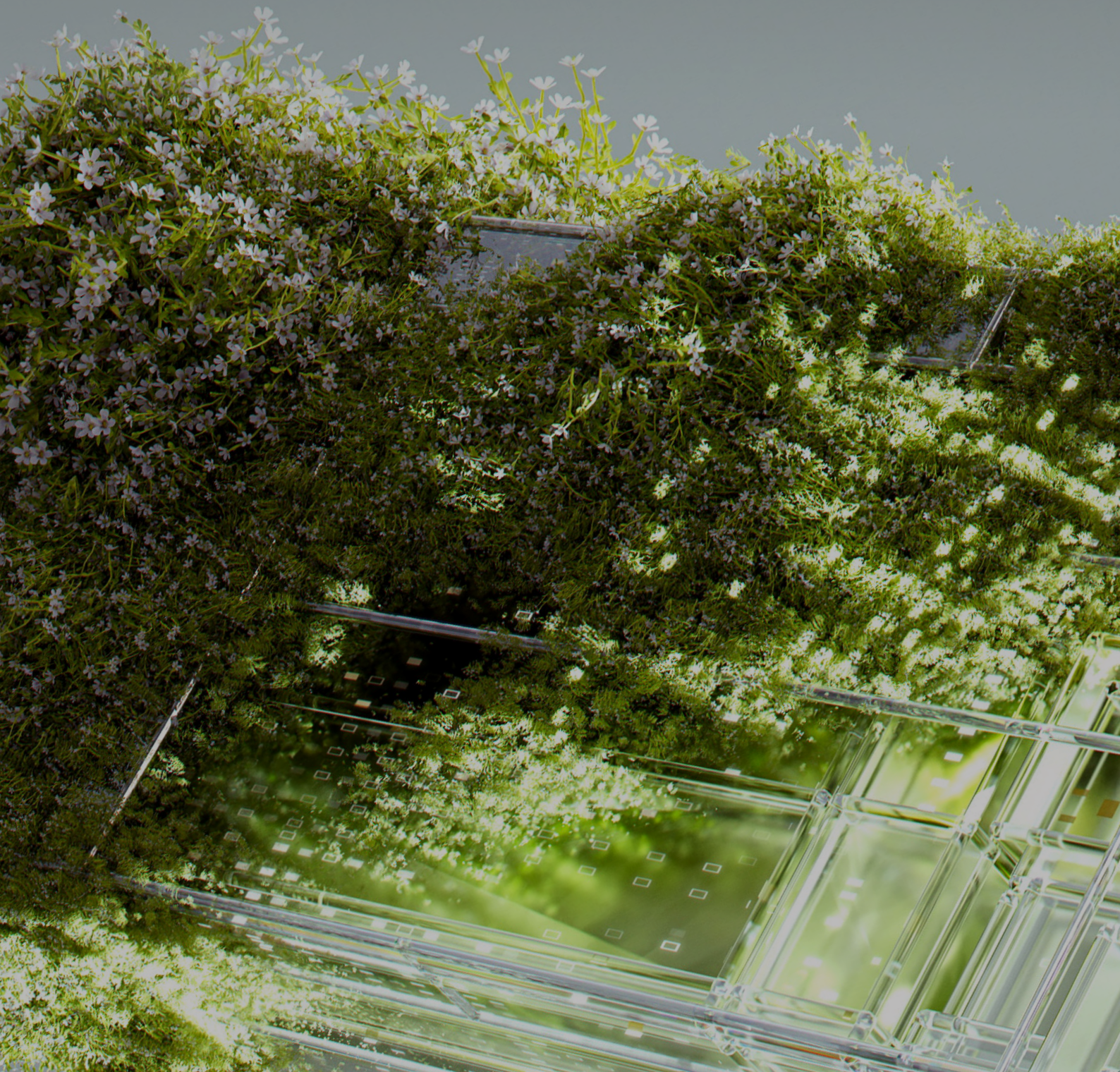


EAT BETTER TODAY

3. ENGAGE THE DENIERS

Brands don't need to spend time trying to understand why these customers are stuck in their beliefs. Instead, they should try to meet them halfway: get close to their concerns, and make change seem inclusive and manageable.

Consider emphasising the benefits, focusing on traditional values, and showing how living sustainably is part of being a good citizen and member of your community.

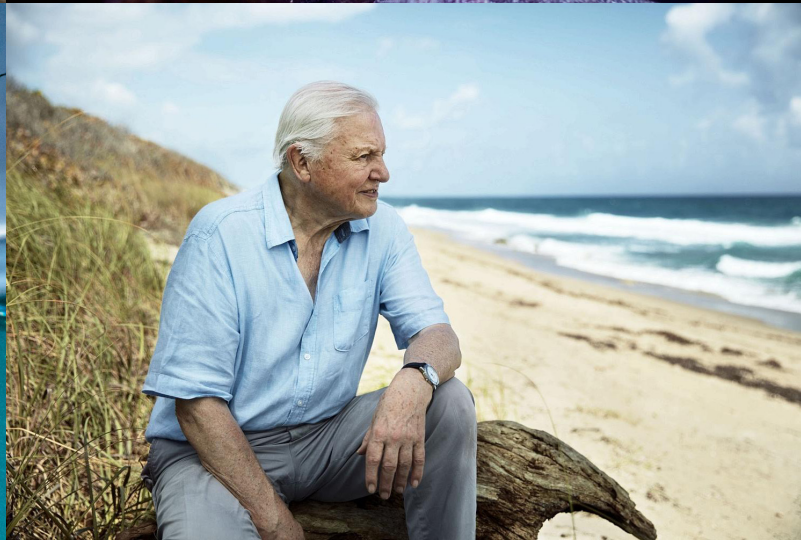


4. PARTNER WITH POSITIVE ROLE MODELS

Cast your mind back to the impact of **David Attenborough's BBC series, Blue Planet II**. The combination of a trusted public figure, capturing the emotional appeal behind saving our oceans, and brands stepping up with sustainable options such as offering paper straws and encouraging use of reusable cups, led to a 53% reduction in single use plastic in the 12 months following the show.

Working with positive role models is a great way for brands to draw people into their environmental messaging. Studies have shown that character-driven stories and emotionally fuelled narratives not only stimulate a physiological response, but inspire real behavioural change.

It might be hard to get this right; consumers can be sceptical, and there is a risk of being seen as jumping on a bandwagon. One way around that is for you to see this as a long-term partnership, rather than a short-term tactical campaign. Finding the right public figure that's a good fit for your brand and your sustainability objectives is crucial – being transparent about the relationship will also build credibility and trust with your customers. Ensure you find a role model that resonates with each segment.

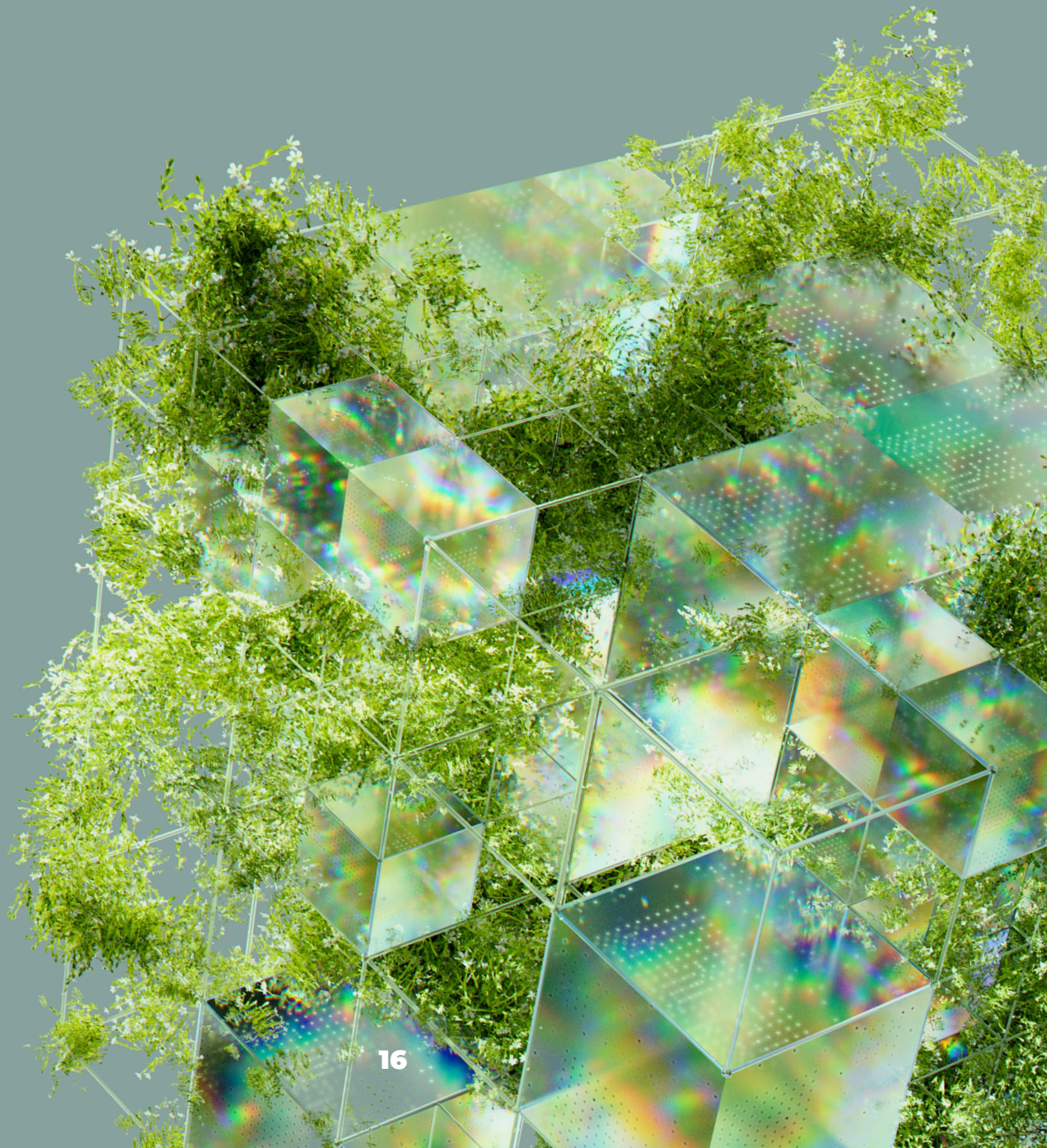


5. BE OPEN ABOUT THE COSTS

According to our research, 44% of respondents believe that sustainable products are just a money-making ploy for brands.

It's crucial to bust this cynical myth. Be transparent about any added costs to the price of a sustainable product and ensure you're clearer on how choosing a sustainable purchase will make a difference.

Try highlighting the long-term cost savings where relevant – for example, buying a one-off case to hold sustainable deodorant or refillable bottles for cleaning products. Creating the right choice architecture and framing the sustainable options to bolster their benefits can encourage more consumers to see their added value.





6. CHECK FOR GREENWASHING, THEN CHECK AGAIN

To successfully navigate the sustainability dilemma, 'avoid greenwashing' should be a refrain playing on a loop for brands. Whatever initiatives and messaging you decide on will fall flat if they come across as inauthentic. This means not only listening to and understanding customers but constantly checking that what you are doing is coherent with your brand and is backed up by your organisation's wider approach to sustainability.

Transparency is key in terms of your motives, the information you give to your customers, and the data you seek from your suppliers.



A ‘GLASS IS HALF FULL’ APPROACH

It is time for brands to rethink their strategies. Pessimism and scaremongering will only serve to entrench people in their existing behaviours. The good news we have all been waiting for is that people are ready to change, and they are looking to brands for support and guidance.

The goal for brands should be to understand where and how to play in order to close the ‘green gap’, to advance people from wanting to live sustainably to actually doing so, and to help them shift their mindsets away from sustainability inertia.

You can do this by making sustainable choices more appealing, exciting and easy to choose; improving education on the benefits of sustainable living in a light touch way; and understanding not only the emotional barriers and frictions, but also the physical obstacles across all sectors, geographies, incomes, and genders.

WONDERING HOW WE GOT HERE?

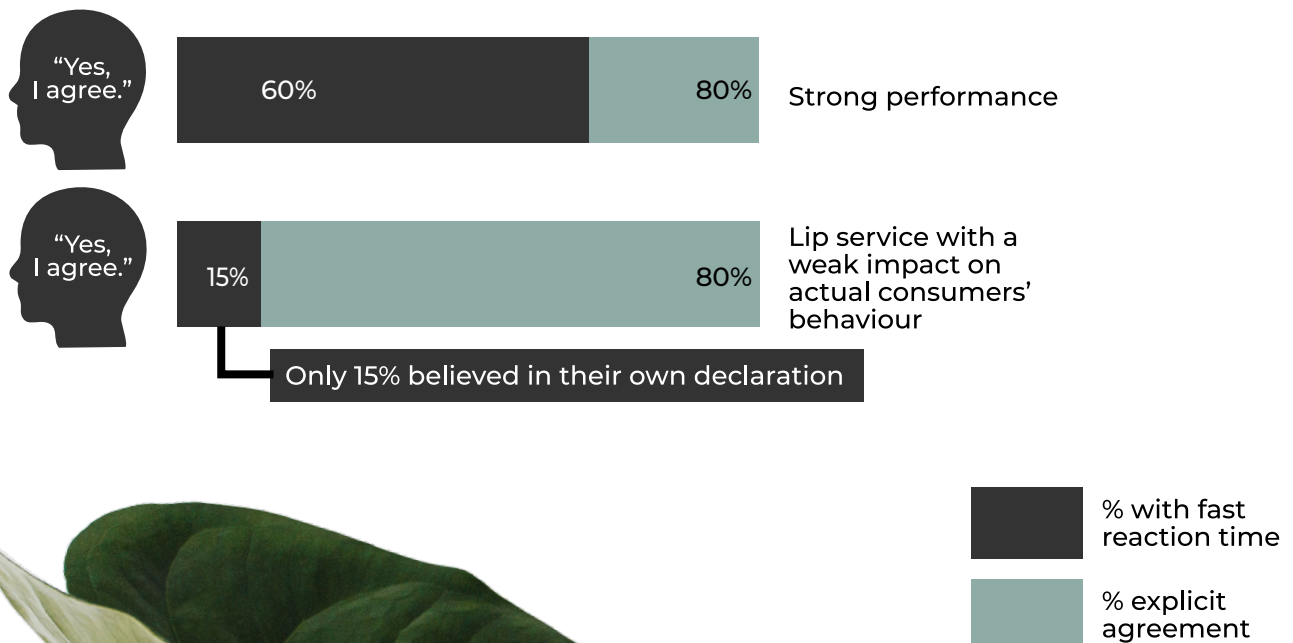
A little reaction time testing can go a long way. So, what is it? In a nutshell, our attitudes exist as a collection of memories represented in the brain by a network of associations. These emotions, colours, shapes, images and sounds are constructed, reinforced or eroded by exposure to advertising, life events, and experiences.

The stronger the link between these associations, the faster we can access them. But people are not good at articulating their attitudes, so understanding the strength of mental associations is vital.

Our approach is based on the attitude accessibility paradigm. This may sound daunting, but all it means is that the stronger an attitude is, the more accessible it is from memory, and the more likely it is to guide behaviour.

Adding that implicit layer means that when we ask respondents whether they agree with a statement, we can compare reaction times to distinguish between those who are just paying lip service to the idea and those who are truly convinced.

Implicit vs explicit agreement



LOOKING FOR A LITTLE UNDERSTANDING?

Getting brand strategy and communication right involves a careful blend of art and science. Throw sustainability into the mix and you will need to ensure that deep human understanding is at the heart of any decision you make.

With deep expertise across research, strategy, and creativity, the Human Understanding Lab can guide you at every stage of developing, refining and implementing your sustainability strategy, whilst ensuring consistency at all your consumer touchpoints.

SOME SPECIFIC QUESTIONS WE CAN HELP YOU ANSWER INCLUDE:

- 🌱 Which strategy will have the most impact among your target audiences?
- 🌱 Are you framing your sustainable options in the right way and providing the right choice architecture to encourage uptake?
- 🌱 Would social proof or a message conveying reciprocity be most effective in driving consumers to choose your sustainable products?
- 🌱 Are you providing the right motivations for customers to want to trial the sustainable options that you offer?
- 🌱 Will these motivations be enough to drive long-term behaviour change?





FIND OUT MORE

Now that you know where to start, it's time to take that first step to a more sustainable world. Are you in?

For more information or to discuss how we can power your sustainability journey, contact our **Human Understanding Lab** experts:



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