DECEMBER 2025 | PROI.COM

PROI WORLDWIDE

Beyond ESG

GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES ON COMMUNICATING IMPACT

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Highlighting the state of **ESG communications** across global markets

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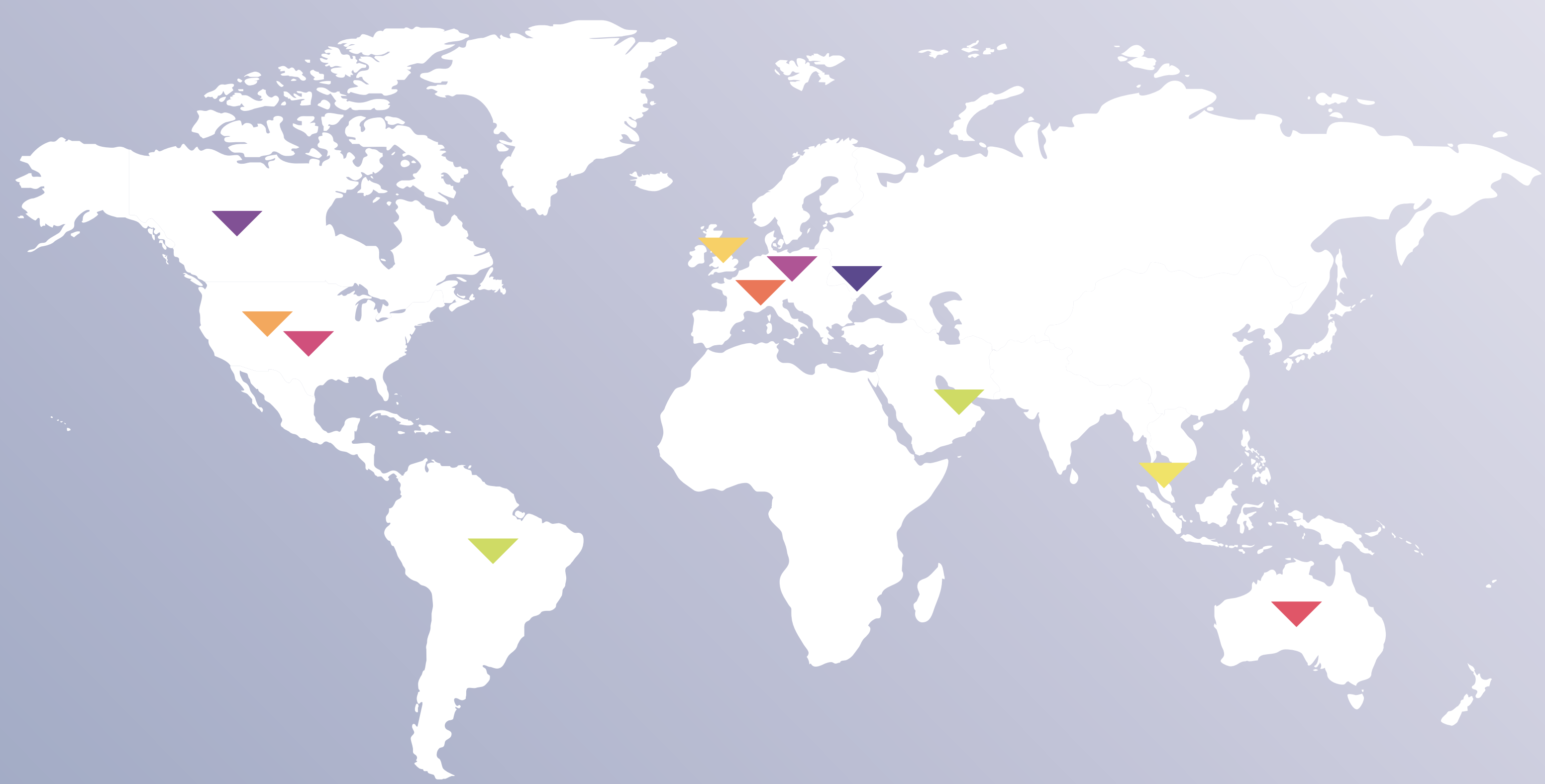

When PROI was first formed 55 years ago, the term "ESG" did not exist. There was only nascent recognition that companies should proactively address and communicate about their environmental impacts. What began as traditional corporate philanthropy—largely focused on local giving with limited connection to business strategy—gradually evolved into the broader concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). By the 1980s, issues such as diversity and inclusion began to move beyond legal compliance to become more central to strategic decision-making. Over time, CSR laid the groundwork for a more integrated understanding of corporate purpose—one that, in the last two decades, has expanded further into what became known as ESG, first formalized through the 2005 UN Global Compact.

Along the way, the PROI network has grown to include 93 entrepreneurial firms spread across 65 countries – firms as diverse as the countries in which they operate. Chief among the qualities they do share is an owner-driven commitment to agency missions. Well connected, and with seasoned leaders interacting daily with clients, PROI firms offer a unique ability to help clients navigate changing dynamics on their home turf and in global markets.

Over the past two decades, the conversation around corporate impact has undoubtedly evolved from checklists and compliance to purpose and progress. Companies are no longer measured solely by their profits, but by how they drive change through sustainability, corporate culture, and good governance. The challenge now lies not just in doing the right thing, but in communicating it with authenticity. From the quiet caution of "greenhushing," to the growing debate over what truly defines responsible leadership, organizations are navigating a new era where values and value creation are inseparable.

The articles curated here reflect how PROI firms around the world are shaping and interpreting the evolving conversation on corporate impact. From Thailand to Ukraine, South America to North America, our local teams are attuned to the realities on the ground—how companies influence their communities, and how that influence is best understood, measured, and shared.

One shift is underway—particularly notable in the United States: Many companies are moving away from the terminology of "ESG" even as they continue to advance the underlying principles of sustainability, equity, and governance. This reflects less a retreat from commitment and more an evolution in language and strategy, as organizations seek to depoliticize their efforts while maintaining credibility with investors, employees, and consumers. The ripple effects of this shift are being felt to different degrees across the globe, as companies recalibrate how they articulate and measure impact without losing momentum.

At the same time, the continued focus of global forums such as COP30 in Brazil underscores that the substance of corporate responsibility remains central to long-term business and societal progress. The challenge ahead lies in reconciling these diverging narratives—between terminology and action, politics and purpose—and in determining how companies can demonstrate measurable progress in an increasingly skeptical and polarized environment.

Rather than provide a single perspective, PROI endeavored to collect a compilation of perspectives from around the globe. Together, these voices weave a tapestry of insight into how companies are communicating their impact, reflecting the depth of expertise and commitment across the PROI network. We invite you to read these pages for greater insights into how best to communicate around sustainability and insight. Likewise, if you haven't already, we hope you will turn to one of our members to guide how you can most successfully position your commitments to support overall business success.

Ted Deutsch
Chair, PROI ESG Group
Executive Managing Director, RF|Binder

RF | BINDER

ESG in **Australia** Why a Stricter Environment Creates a Communications Opportunity

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A nation that welcomes accountability

Australia has long been seen as a pragmatic market when it comes to sustainability. Public trust in business is closely tied to transparency, and Australians generally expect companies to "walk the talk." Over the past year, that expectation has been formalised. The Australian Government has introduced mandatory climate-related financial disclosures aligned to the International Sustainability Standards Board (ISSB), starting with large entities from January 2025. These rules require scenario analysis, governance detail and, over time, assurance, moving ESG from aspiration to compliance-grade reporting.

At the same time, regulators have sharpened their teeth. The Australian Securities and Investments Commission (ASIC) has secured record penalties for greenwashing: AUD12.9 million against Vanguard, a global investment manager, following earlier actions against large Australian superannuation (pension) funds Mercer and Active Super. Meanwhile, the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC), the national consumer watchdog, found 57% of businesses made concerning environmental claims and issued detailed guidance to lift standards. Add to this the Safeguard Mechanism, which caps emissions at 219 major industrial facilities, and the message is clear: ESG in Australia is no longer a "nice to have." It's a license to operate.

Social reporting is also mandatory. Since February 2024, employers with 100+ employees must report gender pay gap data to the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA), with results published publicly. From March 2025, disclosures expand to include median and average pay gaps, CEO remuneration and gender composition by pay quartile, while employers with 500+ staff must have formal gender equality strategies. Non-compliance can affect eligibility for government contracts. The Respect@Work reforms introduced a positive duty under the Sex Discrimination Act, requiring all employers to take proactive steps to prevent sexual harassment–monitored by the Australian Human Rights Commission. The Modern Slavery Act also requires large entities (annual revenue of AUD100 million or more) to publish annual statements on actions to address modern slavery risks in operations and supply chains.

Stricter rules, softer language and the rise of greenhushing

Here's the twist: while regulation has intensified, some companies are saying less. The term "greenhushing" – deliberately under-communicating sustainability progress to avoid scrutiny – has entered the Australian lexicon. This is partly a response to enforcement risk, but also to global politics. The U.S. backlash against "ESG" and "DEI" (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion) has rippled across multinationals, prompting some to reframe public messaging under safer banners like "responsible business" or "social value."

In early 2025, the now-defunct Australian Securities Exchange Corporate Governance Council paused proposed diversity reforms after failing to secure unanimous support. The reforms aimed to lift board targets from 30% women to gender balance (40% women, 40% men) and expand mandatory reporting beyond gender to include age, Indigenous heritage, sexuality and disability, plus disclosure on the effectiveness of diversity and inclusion practices. Business groups opposed the changes, citing compliance costs, lack of cost-benefit analysis and privacy concerns. The debate also reflected a broader global backlash against diversity measures. The Council is now revising the proposals into a shorter, less prescriptive version.

Yet Australians, by and large, welcome the shift to substantiated claims. They want ambition, but they want it backed by evidence. That creates an opportunity: companies that communicate with precision, humility and proof can build trust and competitive advantage in a market that prizes integrity.

The opportunity for better communications

The communications opportunity is twofold:

External communications: Tell evidence-based stories. Anchor claims in regulated disclosures, cite methodologies and assurance status, and show progress, not perfection. Avoid absolutes; define scope and timeframes. This approach not only mitigates risk but builds credibility with investors, regulators and communities.

The term "greenhushing" – deliberately under-communicating sustainability progress to avoid scrutiny – has entered the Australian lexicon. This is partly a response to enforcement risk, but also to global politics. The U.S. backlash against "ESG" and "DEI" (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion) has rippled across multinationals, prompting some to reframe public messaging under safer banners like "responsible business" or "social value."

Internal communications: Bring employees along on the journey. Harness their interest in sustainability, involve them in decision-making and invite them to be part of the solution. When employees understand the "why" and see tangible progress, they become advocates – boosting brand equity and reputation from the inside out.

Case in point: demonstrating social license

Civil construction firm **Sydney Civil** anticipated the changing landscape and undertook a whole-of-business transformation, developing a Sustainability Management Plan, embedding circular economy practices and achieving measurable reductions in emissions and water use.
At the same time, they were able to differentiate from competitors with considered social value creation through targeted procurement, employment and economic inclusion measures for underserved populations. The communications challenge was to match ambition with evidence – linking operational improvements to contract delivery and publishing credible data. A steady program of brand building through substantiated storytelling and positioning rolled out over 12-18 months. The result? Long-term government contracts and recognition as a Banksia Award finalist for sustainability innovation and leadership.

Looking ahead

Australia has recently announced a 2035 emissions reduction target of 62%–70% below 2005 levels, reinforcing its pathway to net zero by 2050. Over the next two to three years, expect assurance requirements to ramp up, climate disclosures to deepen, and nature and biodiversity to join the reporting agenda as the Taskforce on Nature-related Financial Disclosures (TNFD) gains traction. The Australian Sustainable Finance Taxonomy will shape investment language, and greenwashing enforcement will remain active. On the social front, the emerging Taskforce on Inequality and Social-related Financial Disclosures (TISFD) is set to influence global expectations for reporting on workforce equity, human rights and community impacts. For communicators, the mandate is clear: precision, coherence and courage. In a stricter environment, the winners will be those who tell stories that connect, influence behaviour and demonstrate a grounding in fact.

Media coverage trends:

- **Case-driven reporting:** Media now leads with enforcement stories – naming companies, detailing breaches and quoting court findings – creating a strong "name and shame" effect.
- **Scrutiny of language and proof:** Journalists probe the evidence behind claims, contrasting marketing language with compliance-grade disclosure.
- **Spotlight on governance and diversity:** Coverage has expanded to social and governance issues, such as the failed ASX diversity reforms, highlighting tension between ambition and readiness.
- **Global context framing:** Stories link Australian developments to global trends like the U.S. anti-ESG backlash and EU reporting rules, framing ESG as part of a worldwide compliance wave.

Five tips for ESG communications in Australia

1. **Tell evidence-based stories:** Anchor claims in data, disclose methods and assurance status.
2. **Be precise:** Define scope, boundaries and timeframes—avoid absolutes.
3. **Balance ambition with progress:** Share interim milestones to counter greenhushing.
4. **Integrate internal communications:** Engage employees early; make them advocates for your ESG journey.
5. **Connect the dots:** Align climate, social and governance narratives across frameworks (ISSB, TNFD, Taxonomy) for consistency.

imagem corporativa

Brazil Driving the Climate Agenda Towards COP30

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Brazil has been a relevant voice on climate change, environment, and biodiversity conservation. In terms of international collaboration, the country led the G20 in 2024, which discussed economic, financial, and climate issues, and this year hosted the UN's global climate summit COP30 in Belém (Pará), for the first time in the Amazon region. This UN event presented a unique opportunity for Brazil to reinforce its global role, taking advantage of previous experience in global events such as Rio+20 and Eco-92.

Considering this and despite the global scenario, public and government support for ESG in Brazil maintains visibility and consistency. The agenda has gained greater attention recently, due to COP30 in Belém. The event has driven discussions in government, business, and civil society. There was a call for companies to demonstrate their sustainability strategies and communications.

These measures are part of a broader strategy to position Brazil as a global leader in the low-carbon economy, reinforcing both environmental commitments and social development goals. Regulatory momentum is also clear: the Brazilian Securities and Exchange Commission (CVM) will require sustainability and climate-related disclosures for public companies by 2026, based on ISSB-aligned standards.

In Brazil, larger corporations often present ESG as an integrated concept in annual reports. E, S, and G are frequently managed by different teams with separate priorities. The "E" (environmental) dimension currently receives the most public attention, due to deforestation concerns, the energy transition, and Brazil's role in global climate negotiations. The "S" pillar has gained traction in diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, and human rights. Governance remains the least visible in external campaigns but is increasingly crucial from a business and investor relations perspective. Target-setting is still more common for environmental KPIs (emissions, energy, waste), with social and governance goals often qualitative rather than quantitative.

Global challenges on climate agenda and corporate communications

The U.S.' recent political pressures on the climate agenda have been impacting companies' investments in Brazil (local and also European firms that operate locally), and the effects are evident in the communications sphere. As a result of the ideological debate, multinational companies with U.S. investors or headquarters are being more careful in their messaging.

The terms "ESG" and "DEI" (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) remain in use, but language has changed. For instance, some have shifted to using terms like "responsible growth" or "sustainable business" or "impact" in investor materials to avoid political conflicts while some of them are still meeting global disclosure expectations.

Regarding DEI discussions, some companies have stopped explicitly disclosing their initiatives under that label. Programs themselves have not been totally discontinued, but they have been renamed or reframed under different terms to reduce potential political or reputational risks.

The media landscape has also shifted. While mainstream outlets continue to cover ESG-related corporate news, investigative journalism on greenwashing, labor violations, and governance failures has increased. At the same time, niche sustainability media, newsletters, and podcasts are gaining influence, offering deeper coverage for targeted audiences. This creates opportunities: companies can reach targeted audiences with comprehensive stories, but misinformation or partial narratives can also spread quickly on social media and need to be fought.

The most common communications challenges include:

- Demonstrating credibility in a time of misinformation and fake news
- Translating ambition into measurable targets
- Harmonizing environmental (E), social (S), and governance (G)
- Ensuring quality and traceability of ESG data, especially for Scope 3 emissions and social metrics
- Leadership engagement to endorse partnerships and investments, and scale ESG solutions

Our primary recommendation to companies is to communicate with precision, evidence, and purpose. Avoid jargon unless you address technical audiences, and link ESG claims directly to measurable outcomes and business strategy. In Brazil, authenticity carries weight: overpromising can generate backlash not only from NGOs but also from increasingly ESG-savvy consumers. We advise corporate communications departments to identify the ESG strategy, key programs and projects, and how they are connected to the business. Once this is done, align with national priorities, such as the low-carbon economy, bioeconomy, and social mobility, to resonate with both policymakers and the public, and then communicate.

Over the next 2–3 years, ESG communications in Brazil will become more data-driven and intertwined with financial reporting and regulation. With mandatory ISSB-aligned disclosures coming into effect by 2026, data transparency and investor-grade auditability will be essential. As this happens, the ability to translate technical metrics into accessible language will be critical for overall communications strategy.

In summary, ESG in Brazil remains a strategic communications priority, but the expectation for rigor and proof is rising. The aftermath of COP30 amplified this debate, as the event put Brazil in the global spotlight and it is expected to catalyze new narratives on climate justice, low-carbon development, and inclusive growth. For companies, this means balancing regulatory compliance with transparent and culturally adapted communications strategies.

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Canada's Evolving ESG Communications Landscape

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CEO
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In Canada, environmental, social and governance (ESG) communications have undergone a period of recalibration over the past year. While the broad expectation that companies integrate sustainability and social responsibility into their strategies remains intact, the way organizations speak about these issues - and how stakeholders respond - has shifted notably.

Public and government support

Public support for ESG principles continues to be strong in Canada, but it is increasingly nuanced. Consumers and employees expect companies to demonstrate tangible progress rather than rely on aspirational statements. Younger demographics, in particular, scrutinize authenticity and are quick to call out "greenwashing" or "purpose-washing."

On the government side, federal and provincial authorities continue to advance climate-related disclosure requirements and emissions-reduction targets. Canada has aligned with the International Sustainability Standards Board (ISSB) framework, with mandatory climate-related disclosures expected to begin rolling out in 2025-2026. At the same time, there is a degree of political polarization: some provincial governments have emphasized economic growth over strict ESG mandates, mirroring debates happening elsewhere in the world.

U.S. influence on the Canadian market

The American backlash against ESG has not gone unnoticed north of the border. While Canada has not experienced the same level of politicization, U.S. discourse has influenced Canadian corporate leaders to reconsider how explicitly they use the "ESG" label. Some Canadian firms, especially those with significant U.S. operations or investors, are adopting more pragmatic, risk-focused language around "sustainability," "climate risk," or "responsible business" rather than positioning everything under a single ESG umbrella.

We also anticipate greater emphasis on social issues - not only diversity and inclusion but also mental health, equitable access to services, and housing affordability. Companies that can demonstrate a holistic approach, integrating environmental and social responsibility, will be best positioned to earn stakeholder trust.

Language shifts: ESG, DEI, and beyond

The terms "ESG" and "DEI" are still in circulation but are used more selectively. DEI initiatives, in particular, are often reframed under broader commitments to "inclusion" or "belonging," which companies perceive as more relatable and less politicized. Likewise, ESG is increasingly being broken down into its component parts: climate and net-zero goals (E), workplace culture and equity (S), and board oversight (G).

Other language gaining traction includes "responsible growth," "climate resilience," and "social impact." This evolution reflects a desire to ground commitments in practical outcomes while avoiding the perception of buzzwords.

Key challenges in ESG communications

Canadian companies face several challenges when communicating on ESG:

- Skepticism and scrutiny: Media, activists, and consumers demand evidence that companies are meeting their targets. Vague promises are more likely to backfire than ever before.
- Data and disclosure: As reporting standards tighten, companies must navigate complex frameworks while making information understandable to non-expert audiences.
- Balancing ambition and realism: Stakeholders expect bold commitments, but overpromising creates reputational risk if targets are missed.
- Internal alignment: In many organizations, sustainability, HR, investor relations, and communications teams are not fully integrated, making it difficult to present a cohesive ESG story.

Areas of focus

Of the three ESG pillars, environmental issues remain dominant, particularly climate commitments, energy transition, and biodiversity. Social issues, especially around workforce diversity and Indigenous reconciliation, are also gaining prominence. Governance is discussed less frequently in the public arena, but it underpins the credibility of environmental and social commitments.

Most large Canadian corporations continue to set targets in at least one of the three areas, but mid-sized firms often focus on environmental sustainability as a first step before broadening their scope.

Example from the Canadian market

One illustrative example is the Canadian financial sector. Banks and pension funds have faced pressure to align lending and investment practices with net-zero goals. Communications around these commitments have become more sophisticated: instead of broad declarations, institutions are now publishing sector-specific transition plans and timelines. This approach demonstrates measurable progress while acknowledging the complexities of Canada's resource-dependent economy. The shift highlights how stakeholders reward transparency and incremental updates, even if the end goals are decades away.

Communications counsel

Canadian companies face several challenges when communicating on ESG:

- **Be evidence-based** - Ground claims in data and ensure they align with mandatory disclosure standards.
- **Tailor the narrative** - Recognize that investors, employees, customers, and regulators each have different priorities.
- **Show progress, not perfection** - Transparency about challenges or missed targets can build trust.
- **Localize the story** - Tie ESG commitments to Canadian priorities such as reconciliation with Indigenous communities, affordable energy transition, and climate adaptation.

Looking ahead: the next 2–3 years

The role of ESG communications in Canada will continue to evolve from aspirational storytelling to measurable proof points. Companies will be expected to provide annual updates, integrated reporting, and clear explanations of trade-offs. Communications will also need to connect ESG activities directly to business strategy, competitiveness, and resilience in the face of climate and market disruptions.

We also anticipate greater emphasis on social issues - not only diversity and inclusion but also mental health, equitable access to services, and housing affordability. Companies that can demonstrate a holistic approach, integrating environmental and social responsibility, will be best positioned to earn stakeholder trust.

Media trends

The Canadian media landscape has shifted toward greater scrutiny and specialization in ESG reporting. Business outlets increasingly cover climate risk and sustainable finance, while mainstream media highlight stories with community-level impacts, such as renewable energy projects or workforce diversity initiatives. Investigative reporting into greenwashing has also grown, reinforcing the need for accuracy and credibility in corporate communications.

ewing.

The Death of ESG in the **Czech Republic** Has Been Greatly Overexaggerated

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Czech businesses have been exceptionally skeptical when approaching ESG as clearly shown in two surveys from the past 12 months. A poll taken at the end of 2024 showed 80% of Czech companies considered ESG reporting an administrative burden and a necessary evil, while a January survey showed that a full half of 1,900 companies had not prepared to produce an ESG report despite being required to do so.

When the European Council approved the so-called Omnibus this spring, some believed it was the death knell for ESG: Reports would be trashed and we can all go back to the "good old days." However, the two-year delay in non-financial reporting and the softening of rules (along with the reduced number of companies required to file an ESG report) does not mean the end of ESG. And regardless of the regulations, the non-financial information required by ESG reporting has enormous value for corporate management structures.

This is where ESG could revive itself as a concept in the Czech business environment. First of all, there is a need to dispel the idea of ESG reporting as a major administrative obstacle or as a cost that reduces a company's ability to compete and prevents it from succeeding in the global market. Second, the reality of the Czech market is that terms like "sustainability" and "social responsibility" are more palatable for the public than a technocratic acronym like ESG. Czech companies most often focus on the environment portion of ESG, mostly because it is the easiest to define and quantify, while the social and government aspects are often downplayed in communication and thus require a separate approach, which is discussed below.

Part of the current opportunity is that sustainability is enjoying increased attention in the media, with the subject getting more space and being explored in greater depth. The news used to be about legislative mandates and "green bureaucracy," but now the shift is towards presenting the successful results of specific projects spearheaded by companies and their positive effects on sustainability, quality of life, and innovation. There is increased interest in erudite commentary and analyses that help the public better understand the importance of sustainability and its impact on our everyday life over the long term.

At Ewing, we work with our clients by trying to present a way to tell their story through the ESG lens. One of our clients, a water utility, plays a huge role in the surrounding environment and community. With the acceptance of that realization, the company committed itself to ESG principles, and not because it's legislated or mandated by law, but as a show of its value and to show leadership. Ewing guided another client though the creation of its own ESG brand and launched it across six CEE countries. Though the ESG policy was originally envisioned to primarily be an employer branding tool, the company has since earned a significant award as one of Europe's best employers. Though there are no direct metrics to prove a connection between employee satisfaction and the ESG policy as of yet, there is no denying it's a significant piece of the puzzle, and there is a clear link for the argument that companies that strive to create equity will attract the best talent.

While progress has lagged in the S and G areas, the impetus to expand beyond the E in ESG in the Czech environment could come from the banking sector, which is a leader in the Czech ESG space. This is because financial institutions were among the first to be required to file non-financial reports. Most Czech banks are also the subsidiaries of large European institutions that have built out entire teams and methodologies to implement ESG reporting, as well as to evaluate the ESG reports of their clients. This situation presents an opportunity. By offering financial incentives for the adoption and reporting of ESG principles, banks could act as an evangelist for ESG and facilitate greater adoption.

The news used to be about legislative mandates and "green bureaucracy," but now the shift is towards presenting the successful results of specific projects spearheaded by companies and their positive effects on sustainability, quality of life, and innovation.

Help is also on the horizon as ESG processes are increasingly being digitized, which will lead to simpler reporting and better integration of non-financial data into internal corporate decision-making processes. This is another case where early adopters that integrate ESG into their daily processes will have a significant competitive advantage in the eyes of financial institutions, investors, business partners, and consumers. Moreover, an increasing number of companies are beginning to realize that their "good old days" are simply no longer acceptable, and that ESG is simply part of doing business in Europe in 2025. Though ESG has been largely neglected by Czech companies, reports of its demise have been greatly exaggerated, and those that proactively approach its principles and make them an integral part of corporate culture stand to reap huge benefits, much like early adopters of digitalization a few years ago.

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ESG in **Poland** 2025 Between Fatigue, Regulation, and Reinvention

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24/7 Communication

ESG – How prominence evolves

After several years of rapid expansion, the role of ESG in Poland is entering a more pragmatic phase. In 2025, momentum remains, but the public mood has shifted. Immediate concerns, such as inflation, war in Ukraine, and economic insecurity, push long-term issues like climate and inclusion to a background.

Corporate commitment is still visible, especially among listed and international corporate firms, but enthusiasm has cooled. Many businesses now treat ESG chiefly as a regulatory requirement rather than a reputational advantage.

Government engagement remains limited. Progress is driven more by business and institutions such as responsible business forums and industry bodies. The state offers training and toolkits, but rule-setting is largely EU-led.

The U.S. ESG backlash has indirectly influenced Poland. Political shifts in the U.S. and the domestic success of conservative narratives have emboldened critics who argue ESG hurts competitiveness. Many executives echo this concern, shifting emphasis from visionary sustainability toward short-term security, affordability, and resilience.

ESG – Terminology

The term "ESG" is still used, but its luster has faded. Many companies prefer "responsible business," "sustainable development," or "impact," and some avoid the acronym entirely. Language is becoming more practical and human-centered, using phrases as "responsibility toward stakeholders," "health," and "safety."

A leading firm in the dairy industry, once a vocal ESG-communicator, has notably reduced overt ESG messaging. Campaigns now tilt to health, quality of life, and local community impact – reflecting a broader move away from war language such as "fighting climate change" toward tangible well-being.

Despite changing vocabulary, the substance endures. Large corporates like retail giant LPP, ING Bank, and the largest insurer PZU continue integrating non-financial reporting and pursuing climate and diversity targets. The tone has shifted: less ideology, more practicality. Companies highlight specific actions over grand declarations. "Fewer declarations, more facts."

ESG – Challenges

Polish companies face several implementation and communication hurdles.

1. Regulation overload.
The Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) and the European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS) have created complex reporting demands. Many firms, especially smaller ones, view ESG as administrative and costly. Data collection and expertise gaps push some to outsource compliance just to "tick the box."

2. Declining trust and greenwashing risk.
Tolerance for empty claims has vanished. Regulators and NGOs scrutinize greenwashing, social-washing, and employer-washing. Firms must provide evidence for every statement. In Poland, clearer guidance on environmental claims is driving a more cautious, proof-first approach.

3. Imbalance within ESG.
The "E" still dominates, while "S" and "G" are underexposed. Yet many leaders argue ESG "starts with G": good governance, ethical leadership, and employee well-being are prerequisites for environmental and social progress. "You can't do E and S without people – and people need a healthy, trusted workplace."

4. Changing employee expectations.
The gap between corporate claims and staff perception is widening, especially among younger employees. This threatens retention; up to a quarter of employees would change jobs for a more sustainable employer.

Concrete practice is winning credibility. Netto Polska, for example, avoids sweeping "green" labels and communicates simple, verifiable actions – cage-free eggs, food-waste cuts – showing progress without overclaiming.

ESG – Communication

The rulebook is being rewritten. Authenticity, accuracy, and human relevance matter most.

Key recommendations include:

- Communicate separately on E, S, and G. Focused narratives are easier to grasp and test.
- Use data, not adjectives. Report measurable outcomes and secure third-party assurance.
- Balance optimism with honesty. Acknowledge constraints and trade-offs.
- Avoid buzzwords. Describe concretely what was done and what changed.
- Stay consistent. Provide regular updates, not just an annual report.

Tone also matters. Moralizing can alienate audiences in a polarized climate. Effective communicators tie ESG to shared values that are close to audiences – safety, health, family, national resilience – rather than abstract global missions. As one consultant put it: "Better to say less, but with relevance and proof."

ESG – The next years

Over the next two to three years, ESG in Poland will likely evolve from a compliance duty to a governance-anchored performance standard. Enthusiasm may be lower, but expectations and regulation make ESG unavoidable. Companies that treat it strategically – linking sustainability to efficiency, cost, risk, and talent – will gain an edge.

Expect "G" to lead the next phase: governance, ethics, and responsible leadership will frame how "E" and "S" are pursued. The narrative will be less about saving the planet and more about building trustworthy, resilient organizations that can execute.

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ESG communication will integrate more tightly with financial storytelling. CEOs and CFOs will discuss sustainability alongside results. Reporting will move from static PDFs to dashboards and multi-channel updates. Accountability will rise, with NGOs, media, and online users intensifying real-time fact-checking. Only credible, evidenced communication will stand.

Expect "G" to lead the next phase: governance, ethics, and responsible leadership will frame how "E" and "S" are pursued. The narrative will be less about saving the planet and more about building trustworthy, resilient organizations that can execute.

ESG – Media reporting

Media interest has peaked and stabilized. Traditional outlets are more selective and less likely to publish unpaid sustainability content; paid partnerships are common. At the same time, journalism is more critical. Reporters verify claims and seek demonstrable impact. LinkedIn and X have become primary arenas for ESG debate – and criticism – with immediate public feedback from activists, employees, and consumers.

Environmental themes still dominate roughly one third of ESG coverage, but attention to governance and social topics is growing, especially around scandals, diversity, labor standards, or workplace rights. This raises the bar for corporate communicators: mere presence in media is not enough; maturity, balance across ESG, and readiness for scrutiny are essential.

Conclusion: ESG in search of a new narrative

ESG in Poland is not disappearing; it is maturing through fatigue and skepticism. The first wave of enthusiasm has yielded to realism: compliance is mandatory, communication must be credible, and leadership must be authentic.

Companies that adapt – speaking plainly, prioritizing governance, and proving impact – will preserve trust and relevance. ESG starts with G – and with people who believe that doing business responsibly still matters.

Saying Less, Proving More ESG Communication in **Switzerland** is Under Scrutiny

Michael Felber
Partner
int/ext

In recent years, the focus on ESG principles in Switzerland has been subtly but noticeably deepening, by the general public, by governmental actors, and not least by businesses. Examples of this are more binding disclosure obligations, the continued integration of ESG targets into corporate governance structures, or growing awareness of the reputational calculations around increasing stakeholder expectations. Today, ESG is a key strategic dimension in many business decisions.

A popular mandate for sustainability

The adoption of the Swiss Climate and Innovation Act in 2023, supported by 59% of voters, translated the public's backing of concrete climate targets into new regulations. It expresses a maturing sense of sustainability beyond an NGO cause or corporate buzzword. At the policy level, the Swiss government has also been promoting ESG-related regulation, such as a directive requiring large companies to disclose non-financial information (environmental, social, and human rights factors) as of 2024. While milder than the EU's CSRD, these actions move Switzerland on a parallel path and aim to align Swiss businesses with the regulatory regime in the EU – their largest export market.

Pragmatism over polarization

While the international – primarily US-orientated – discourse related to ESG topics has become more fraught and even polarized recently, that shift has, so far, not found meaningful traction here. Perhaps Swiss stakeholders view ESG as less of a cultural or political flashpoint and more of a necessity. That said, Swiss multinationals with global footprints have become more nuanced in their language, no doubt aware that what plays well in Basel might land differently in Washington.

And while the English acronyms ESG and DEI remain widely used in international contexts, there seems to be a preference to using less politicized or more accessible language toward domestic audiences. "Sustainability," "social responsibility," or "people and planet" feature prominently in corporate communications. Terms like "diversity" and "inclusion" are sometimes retained, but DEI as a label does not have a local language counterpart.

Key challenges

This is, however, less about avoiding certain terms and more about ensuring clarity in communications, not least to avoid an appearance of greenwashing. Yet, clear language does not always lead to more acceptance and trust. Swiss stakeholders are growing more skeptical of ESG claims. Companies need to be aware of the risks of greenwashing. An illustrative example happened in 2023, when FIFA's "carbon-neutral World Cup" claims were ruled as being misleading by a Swiss advertising watchdog. Cases such as these remind communicators that ESG claims must be well-supported by evidence.

A sticky challenge lies in balancing the ESG pillars. While the "E" continues to dominate, Swiss companies like to talk about employee well-being and local community engagement–often under the traditional CSR umbrella. However, because CSR was historically voluntary, the "S" often remains anecdotal compared to climate metrics. This imbalance leaves room for improvement.

In practice, many companies communicate ESG in an integrated way, bundling the three pillars into a single narrative or sustainability report. Increasingly, the formerly separate or annexed ESG, CSR, or sustainability reports are being integrated into the annual report.

Stakeholders want to see not only ambitious goals but credible pathways and year-over-year progress. But setting targets in public introduces reputational risk. If milestones are missed, companies must be prepared to explain why, and how they will adapt. In this climate, some Swiss companies opt to be more cautious. They prefer to underpromise (even "greenhush") and overdeliver, rather than having to admit the reverse.

Our counsel: conscious transparency

From a communications counsel perspective, the advice we give clients is rather straightforward but still not easy to execute. First, be consciously transparent. ESG is not a marketing tool and is increasingly subject to similar standards as financial reporting. Claims must be evidence-based and the journey should be shared openly even when the story isn't perfect. Admitting gaps or areas for improvement and showing you have a solid pathway often builds more trust than boasting.

Language should also be tailored for the audience. Technical terms like "ESG" may work well in boardrooms but risk confusing general audiences. It's better to speak in values: climate protection, ethical sourcing, fairness in the workplace.

While the international – primarily US-orientated – discourse related to ESG topics has become more fraught and even polarized recently, that shift has, so far, not found meaningful traction here.

The next few years

Looking ahead mid-term, we would expect ESG communications in Switzerland to become more integrated with other non-financial and financial reporting, more data-driven and aligned with respective standards, and more scrutinized. As disclosure regulations become stricter, communications professionals who can translate complex sustainability data into accessible stories will be crucial.

The role of media will also remain central. Swiss journalists, particularly those covering business, finance, and sustainability, have become sophisticated in how they cover ESG. They are asking tougher questions and looking for potential gaps between promise and performance. Greenwashing is now part of their vocabulary, and scrutiny is increasing.

For us as communicators, this means preparing for a world in which ESG storytelling is more necessary and also more difficult. The fundamentals: stay honest, stay specific, stay responsive, and practice good issue management.
What companies are (legally) required to disclose and what they are (reputationally) expected to share is increasingly overlapping. ESG is no longer the "bonus question", it's a core part of how a company secures its license to operate.

ESG in **Thailand** From Commitment to Implementation

Chelsea King
Head of PR Operations and Editorial Director
Midas PR

ESG in Thailand is shifting rapidly from broad commitments to concrete implementation. Businesses and government alike now view ESG as central to long-term competitiveness, economic resilience, and access to global markets.

Public support continues to strengthen year-on-year, though Thai consumers remain cost-conscious. Still, recent PwC research (August 2024) shows 54% of Thais would pay 11.7 – 12% more for green products, exceeding the global average of 9.7%, a signal that sustainability has moved from aspiration to purchasing power.

On the policy side, Thailand is building a structured ESG ecosystem that blends regulation, transparency, and fiscal incentives. The government will expand its sustainable finance taxonomy in 2025, introduce stricter disclosure requirements, and advance a Climate Change Act that mandates carbon pricing and emissions trading. Incentives include tax deductions for energy-saving equipment, rooftop solar, and ESG-aligned investment funds. These measures represent a marked shift from endorsement to financially-backed action, accelerating corporate adoption.

Global pressures driving change

External forces are also shaping Thailand's ESG trajectory:

- **European Union:** The EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) requires Thai exporters of carbon-intensive goods to report embedded emissions now and pay a carbon price from 2026 if they fail to decarbonise. This creates direct financial pressure and has spurred Thailand's domestic carbon tax and mandatory reporting efforts.
- **United States:** U.S. pressures arise mainly through supply chains. The SEC's climate disclosure rule and major retailers demand ESG data from Thai suppliers. At the same time, enforcement of the Uyghur Forced Labour Prevention Act (UFLPA) has heightened scrutiny of solar, apparel, and auto-parts exports. Together, these dynamics are embedding ESG into the trade calculus of Thai companies.

Language and framing of ESG and DEI

In Thailand, **ESG** is firmly embedded in corporate language and increasingly codified in regulation. From mid-2025, SET-listed companies must disclose environmental, social, and governance data, including Scope 1, 2, and 3 emissions, aligned with international standards such as FTSE Russell. Businesses are also incentivised through alignment with the Bio-Circular-Green (BCG) Economy strategy.

By contrast, **DEI** terminology is less explicitly used. Instead, companies favour culturally resonant terms like employee engagement, inclusion, belonging, and corporate culture. Social activities are typically reported under human capital management, community investment, or social impact. This reflects a broader global trend: explicit DEI language is softer, but the principles are increasingly embedded in governance structures and board oversight.

Communications challenges

Communicating ESG in Thailand comes with distinct challenges:

1. **Authenticity** – Activities must align with the core business purpose and Thailand's socioeconomic context. Stakeholders are quick to dismiss "bolt-on" initiatives.
2. **Credibility** – Media and the public scrutinise vague claims, favouring measurable, data-driven reporting.
3. **Accessibility** – Complex frameworks like sustainable taxonomies or carbon pricing require plain-language translation to resonate with broader audiences.

Most companies communicate ESG under a single umbrella, most often sustainability, rather than separating E, S, and G. Environmental disclosures dominate, particularly around emissions and energy use. However, governance surfaces via ASEAN Corporate Governance Scorecard results and social coverage often arises through human rights due diligence.

Case example: Fair Finance Thailand

The rollout of **Thailand's Sustainable Finance Taxonomy 2.0** demonstrates the importance of clear communications. Technical revisions risked being misinterpreted as greenwashing, especially with relaxed criteria in some areas. The communications approach focused on three angles:

- What changed – addition of four new sectors and a traffic-light system.
- Who it affects – banks, listed firms, borrowers.
- What to watch – disclosure of mitigation plans, evaluator oversight, and adaptation gaps.

By combining sector-specific mini-cases with independent expert commentary, media coverage emphasised safeguards, accountability, and the need for ongoing evolution. This positioned the taxonomy as a living, adaptive document rather than a one-off compliance exercise.

Counsel for companies

For Thai businesses seeking to communicate ESG, our agency offers four guiding principles:

- **Be authentic** – Ground ESG in business strategy and local context.
- **Walk the talk** – Only commit to goals backed by tangible, measurable action.
- **Stay transparent** – Acknowledge setbacks openly and explain corrective steps.
- **Localise impact** – Showcase how ESG benefits Thai people and communities, tapping into national pride.

The next 2–3 years

Looking ahead, ESG communications in Thailand will become more technical, compliance-focused, and data-led. Media coverage has already shifted:

- ESG is reported through the lens of trade and compliance, linking directly to CBAM, the EU Deforestation Regulation, and domestic disclosure rules.
- Journalists increasingly reference hard data from sources like SET's ESG Data Platform, the 56-1 One Report, and TCFD-aligned disclosures.
- Coverage has grown more sceptical, with opinion pieces probing carbon credits, greenwashing, and the legal consequences of misleading claims.
- At the same time, outlets are experimenting with sustainability hubs and explainer content to make ESG topics more accessible to broader audiences.

In this environment, companies must combine transparency and credibility with localised storytelling that connects ESG to tangible benefits for Thai people and industries. The future of ESG communications in Thailand lies at the intersection of global compliance, domestic pride, and authentic corporate accountability.

ESG in **Ukraine** Between War and European Integration

Miroslava Gribova
Managing Director
Be—it Agency

Over the past several years, Ukraine has witnessed a profound transformation in how both business and government approach environmental, social, and governance (ESG) principles. While war reshaped national priorities, ESG has not disappeared from the agenda. Instead, it is evolving under the influence of internal social dynamics and EU requirements for sustainability.

In October 2024, the Ukrainian government approved the Strategy for the Implementation of Sustainability Reporting by Enterprises. For the first time, a national-level policy explicitly committed Ukraine to harmonize its reporting with EU standards under the *Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive* and *European Sustainability Reporting Standards*. The implementation began in 2024 and will run until 2030, with non-financial audit procedures introduced along the way.

The social aspect of ESG remains the primary focus in Ukraine; however, environmental impact and governance are gaining importance. For businesses aiming to access EU markets, attract investment, or secure donor funding, compliance is no longer optional but a necessity. For example, our client **PrivatBank** had to accelerate its climate alignment in order to participate in programs of international financial institutions such as the EBRD.

Unlike in the U.S., the term **DEI (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion)** has never been widely used in Ukraine. Instead, companies typically communicate their efforts through broader concepts such as *sustainable development, corporate social responsibility*, or simply *sustainability*. The abbreviation **ESG** remains the dominant shorthand, particularly in formal reporting.

During wartime, the narrative of **"barrier-free access"** has become central for many organizations. This reflects the profound social changes Ukraine is experiencing: the growing number of veterans returning from the front, people with war-related disabilities, and millions of displaced persons. Businesses and institutions are therefore under pressure to design inclusive workplaces, services, and infrastructure.

PrivatBank has taken tangible steps in this direction by expanding the number of accessible branches across the country, introducing sign language video consultations in its mobile app and specific services for areas near the frontline.

Ukrainian companies do not commit to measurable targets, since mandatory reporting is still being phased in. War-related social initiatives dominate. Ukrainian state-owned or private businesses prioritize support for defense. For example, PrivatBank has become a major fundraising platform during the war, enabling millions of Ukrainians to contribute to defense and humanitarian causes through its payment infrastructure. In addition to donations to the Armed Forces and major charity funds, the bank supports grassroots volunteering through *Konverty*, its digital fundraising tool.

By contrast, **international companies in Ukraine often take a different approach,** focusing on more specific or niche aspects of ESG. Our client agrochemical company **FMC** launched a campaign dedicated to demining agricultural lands—a pressing issue for Ukraine's food security and lands recovery. This initiative earned the company the **Global Compact Partnership for Sustainability Award,** a rare recognition of how ESG can be adapted to urgent local realities.

Meanwhile, **McDonald's Ukraine,** along with focusing its efforts on social and humanitarian issues, has also concentrated on environmental initiatives, particularly circular economy practices and waste minimization. Such projects illustrate how global corporations tend to emphasize the "E" of ESG—environmental impact—while Ukrainian businesses remain centered on the "S"—social response to war.

Across sectors, all responsible international businesses also make a point of highlighting their exit from the Russian market, positioning this decision as both an ethical stance and a governance issue central to their ESG commitments.

Today, in Ukraine it is no longer enough for a company to report strong financials or deliver quality products and services; what truly matters is how it contributes to society. As a result, classic media have become more open to ESG-related stories, particularly when they highlight resilience, innovation, and community support, and when companies link their initiatives to Ukraine's broader survival and recovery.

At the same time, **ESG communications in Ukraine faces significant challenges.** Many companies lack consistent narratives: their messaging tends to be situational, fragmented, or purely reactive to current events. This makes it difficult to build long-term trust and demonstrate progress over time. Furthermore,

Across sectors, all responsible international businesses also make a point of highlighting their exit from the Russian market, positioning this decision as both an ethical stance and a governance issue central to their ESG commitments.

Ukrainian society is living under extreme pressure, and the collective stress of war shapes how messages are received. Audiences are quick to spot insincerity or opportunism, and companies risk criticism. In this context, **compassion and meaning-making become essential elements of communication,** helping businesses not only to inform but also to resonate with people's lived experiences.

The role of ESG in Ukraine will only grow in the years to come. As integration with the European Union deepens, regulatory pressure will intensify, and stakeholders, from international partners to local communities, will expect more than ad hoc social projects. Companies will need to demonstrate measurable progress, particularly once mandatory reporting and non-financial audits take full effect.

This means that ESG in Ukraine will gradually shift from a **reactive, war-driven agenda** to a more systemic, strategic approach. Businesses that currently focus on immediate defense or humanitarian support will increasingly be asked to articulate **long-term commitments to environmental stewardship, governance standards, and social inclusion.** For many, this will require not just compliance but cultural change—embedding sustainability into decision-making and business models.

At the same time, communication will play a critical role. Ukrainian companies will need to move away from situational or fragmented messaging and instead build **consistent narratives based on values and strategic goals.** Transparency, compassion, and authenticity will remain essential, but they must be complemented by clarity of vision and proof of impact. Stakeholders—whether regulators, partners, employees, or the public—will expect evidence that ESG is not an afterthought but a **core part of business resilience.**

Public and Government Support for ESG in the **Middle East**

Marianna Wisden
Associate Partner
Mojo Group

Public and government support for ESG

Across the Middle East, governments are placing sustainability at the centre of national strategies for economic growth and diversification. Initiatives such as Saudi Vision 2030, UAE Net Zero 2050, and Qatar National Vision 2030 integrate environmental, social, and governance (ESG) priorities into plans for energy transition, infrastructure development, and competitiveness.

It is striking that economies historically defined by oil wealth are now among the most active in mandating ESG commitments. Far from resisting the global transition, they are setting some of the clearest regulatory frameworks for companies to follow.

The UAE's new climate law, now in effect, requires all businesses regardless of size or sector to measure, report, and reduce emissions. Businesses have until 30th May 2026 to establish compliance, after which heavy financial penalties will be enforced. Saudi Arabia also mandates sustainability reporting for listed companies. These steps are embedding ESG expectations into the region's corporate landscape and shaping how businesses communicate their activities.

From renewable energy and water management to transport and digital infrastructure, public–private partnerships ensure that businesses align operations with government priorities, creating opportunities for companies to demonstrate their contributions through collaboration.

The political backlash against ESG in the United States has had little effect in this region. Policymakers see ESG as a practical agenda for growth and innovation rather than an ideological issue, linking it directly to job creation, foreign investment, and infrastructure delivery.

Evolution of ESG and DEI terminology

While ESG and DEI remain standard in regulatory and investor language, companies are shifting towards terms such as sustainability, resilience, responsibility, impact, and nationalisation in their external communications.

Diversity and inclusion language reflects local workforce priorities, including Emiratisation, Saudisation, and the promotion of youth and women in employment. Acronyms have given way to terminology that connects directly with national policy objectives and tangible social outcomes.

Challenges in ESG communications

Communicating ESG effectively in the Middle East involves addressing several challenges. Global ESG frameworks must adapt to local expectations and sensitivities. After the pledges made around COP28, stakeholders now expect measurable progress, and overstated or vague claims risk reputational damage.

Some companies integrate all initiatives under a single sustainability strategy, while others communicate separately about environmental, social, and governance pillars. Environmental topics dominate communications, particularly emissions reduction, renewable energy, and circular economy initiatives. Social narratives often highlight workforce localisation, youth skills, and gender parity.

Governance typically remains compliance-driven but is gaining momentum with the adoption of global reporting standards. **ICAEW** has advocated for alignment with international disclosure frameworks such as the IFRS Sustainability Disclosure Standards, while **Hawkamah,** the regional corporate governance institute, has pushed for stronger corporate governance practices across the Gulf. Their efforts are raising expectations for consistency and transparency in how companies report and communicate ESG.

Net-zero commitments are common, but fewer companies publish specific social or governance metrics.

Several companies illustrate how ESG narratives have evolved in the region. **Ecolab** has positioned itself as a leader in water sustainability, particularly in the context of water-intensive data centres as Saudi Arabia and the UAE emerge as global digital infrastructure hubs. **EQUATE Petrochemicals** combines regional environmental initiatives with global leadership as a member of the Alliance to End Plastic Waste, linking local relevance with international commitments. **Mars** achieved gender parity in its Middle East leadership and influenced national labour policy in Egypt by opening new employment opportunities for women, showing how a private company can spark wider social change. **Spinneys,** the UAE's leading supermarket chain, integrates sustainability across its operations, targeting net zero by 2040 and embedding ESG performance into executive KPIs to ensure accountability at the highest level.

It is striking that economies historically defined by oil wealth are now among the most active in mandating ESG commitments. Far from resisting the global transition, they are setting some of the clearest regulatory frameworks for companies to follow.

Counsel for companies entering the region

For companies looking to communicate ESG activities effectively in the Middle East, aligning with national visions is essential to demonstrate clear contributions to flagship government programmes and national policy objectives.

- Global priorities should be translated into local value by linking ESG goals to job creation, skills development, and community outcomes.
- Broad pledges should be replaced with transparent, verifiable progress updates to build credibility.
- Companies should position ESG as an opportunity rather than an obligation, presenting it as a driver of competitiveness, innovation, and long-term growth.
- Messages should be tailored to diverse stakeholders including governments, regulators, employees, investors, and the wider public to ensure broad resonance.

The future of ESG communications

Over the next two to three years, several major shifts are expected. ESG will increasingly be presented as a core business driver rather than a standalone CSR programme, reflecting its growing integration into corporate strategy.

New regulatory requirements for disclosure will drive demand for measurable, evidence-based communications, ensuring that reporting moves beyond aspirations towards delivery. Companies that treat disclosure as a tick-box exercise will risk both reputational and financial consequences. Transparency will become the baseline expectation across the region, with narratives highlighting how sustainability initiatives create jobs, develop skills, and benefit local communities.

Media landscape trends

Media outlets across the Middle East continue to cover ESG positively, particularly in areas aligned with national priorities. Climate action, renewable energy, and innovation attract the most attention, while terms like sustainability and green economy resonate more strongly with audiences than ESG itself. Human-centred stories focusing on youth employment, entrepreneurship, and social impact are especially effective in broadening the relevance of ESG communications beyond policymakers and investors to reach the wider public. The UAE climate law is also expected to sharpen media scrutiny, with reporters seeking concrete compliance and reduction plans. Companies that engage early will stay ahead of the story.

Conclusion

In the Middle East, ESG communications are most effective when they align global sustainability priorities with regional realities. Companies that demonstrate measurable contributions to national visions, public–private partnerships, and community outcomes will gain both credibility and influence. As expectations for transparency and delivery continue to grow, communicators have a critical role in shaping narratives that connect environmental, social, and governance efforts to economic growth and long-term resilience.

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ESG and Sustainability Communications in the **UK**

Sam Sharpe
Sustainability Lead + Director
Lansons

The political context and Trump effect

In the past year, ESG in the UK has shifted from being mostly a badge of pride to something more fragile, that now feels scrutinised, contested, and under political pressure. The debate is about speed and cost, with multiple organisations - from political parties to businesses - bowing to short-term pressure from shareholders and the right to slow the pace of transition. Consumer support still remains strong but can be generally summarised, as the realities of climate change hit public pockets, in five words: high concern but urgency waning.

Whilst some rollbacks were made pre the second-term election of Trump (notably Rishi Sunak's September 2023 pushback of the ban on the sale of ICE vehicles), the American president's return to office appears to have given permission for the sceptics here to grow in voice. The UK government changed to Labour, for the first time since 2010, just five months before Trump's re-election. It came in on some punchy climate policies - including a ban on new oil and gas licenses and a new national energy body - but it has since diluted its policies, partly due to an economic squeeze and pressure from the right.

We have also seen an increasingly critical media; in the first four months of this year UK newspapers had already launched more editorials attacking the UK's Net Zero Minister, Ed Miliband, than they did in the whole of 2024.

The most worrying political signal is the growth of the new right-wing party Reform. Its growing electoral support (though this is still minimal), including local councils pushing back against renewable energy projects and green targets, is sharpening public debate. Reform's 2024 manifesto explicitly pledged to scrap net zero commitments, framing them as cost burdens on households and industries. The party held an annual conference for the first time this year; discussion at the event labelled ESG and net zero as woke and elitist.

Investor relations, governance reports, and technical audiences often still use ESG, but many consumer or general public-facing communications are moving away from the acronym - choosing instead words such as sustainability, responsible business, impact, and climate action. DEI is increasingly being absorbed into wider conversations and programmes under culture, equity, belonging or values.

The main opposition party, the Conservatives, has also said it would remove all net-zero requirements on oil and gas companies drilling in the North Sea, saying their plans would "maximise extraction" and that net zero mentions mean households end up "paying the price in higher energy bills."

All in all, the economic realities of having to re-wire our economies to a more sustainable one, in line with the Paris Agreement and securing a more stable future, on such a rapid timeframe, is proving easy and popular prey for the political right.

What are businesses doing?

There are signs some UK companies are downgrading their net-zero ambitions. A number of companies (including several big high-street names) have pushed back net-zero targets or stepped away from the Science Based Targets Initiative-aligned net-zero pledges (due to challenges around plans and verification).

Government inconsistency has also had an impact. While commitments like net zero still feature in policy, mixed signals around planning for renewable infrastructure, licensing for oil and gas, and regulation have created ambiguity that is having ripple effects across the private sector.

Terminology

ESG and DEI are still used in the UK but less frequently and with more caution. Investor relations, governance reports, and technical audiences often still use ESG, but many consumer or general public-facing communications are moving away from the acronym - choosing instead words such as sustainability, responsible business, impact, and climate action. DEI is increasingly being absorbed into wider conversations and programmes under culture, equity, belonging or values.

This is no bad thing. The acronym was overused, misunderstood, and used as a catch-all term for everything - from barely playing by the rules to industry-redefining change.

Counsel and looking ahead

- **Own the journey and measurement isn't everything:** Transition is nuanced and complex. Organisations should be transparent on the challenges, and stakeholders will increasingly demand evidence (e.g. audited emissions, biodiversity data, social impact metrics) but don't let a lack of measurement in every area hold up progress.

- **Forget jargon, just describe what you're actually doing:** ESG and DEI have been so overused and inflated that - whilst critically important - as umbrella acronyms they have become loaded and lost power. Instead, use words, e.g. climate action, nature restoration, equity rather than just ESG or DEI.

- **Take a lasagna approach:** Different audiences want different things. Consumers and employees want relatable stories and human interest; government or large organisation procurement needs technical information; discerning clients or customers may want a middle ground - meaningful descriptions of ambition and action with clear proof points. Most organisations need to cater to all of those audiences and should make sure every layer of information is clear and accessible.

- **The impression matters as much as the facts:** The fear of greenwashing is much stronger. Third-party scrutiny (media, NGOs, investors) demands that CSR/ESG claims are backed by data, by third-party verification. The UK Advertising Standards Board has sharpened its teeth in the last two years; it has pulled companies up not just on what they do say, but what they don't (i.e. the impression given through advertising focused purely on sustainable

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funds/activities is misleading and unacceptable if you're still invested more in oil and gas than renewables).

- **Prepare for political pushback:** With Reform UK and similar voices growing, practice defence of your strategy: economic benefits, job creation, innovation, risk mitigation. The economic case has never mattered more.
- **Ensure it doesn't look like an add-on or silo - demonstrate it is integrated across the business:** Align internal operations, HR, supply chain, communications so statements have substance. Look at websites and external channels - does sustainability clearly cut across everything? Or does it look added-on?

Next 2-3 years

Whilst scrutiny and communications on these issues will become more about delivery than ambition, ambition still matters. Make that ambition clear. The language will continue to shift: sustainability, climate, and societal value will dominate, while ESG may retreat to specialist or investor contexts. Reporting regulation (UK and EU) will tighten, forcing more standardised disclosures. Companies that remain rigid or vague will see reputational and financial risk increase.

Media coverage is also evolving: more skepticism, more investigative journalism, more emphasis on whether companies are doing the work - not just talking about it (we believe the FT keeps a log of company promises versus commitment). But there is also demand for solutions, for stories where business, communities and government collaborate - and for good news...

Many headlines in the UK will talk about the death of ESG. We might see the demise of the acronym - but the ambitions, actions, and issues behind it will remain.

U.S. Perspectives on ESG Communications

Jillian Semaan
Partner
FINN Partners

Shifting policy and public sentiment

ESG communications have entered a more complex and contested phase in the United States. Political rhetoric, regulatory scrutiny, and shifting public expectations are reshaping how companies talk about sustainability and responsible business.

Federal agencies such as the SEC continue to advance disclosure requirements around climate risk, governance, and material sustainability factors, moving from aspirational pledges toward mandatory reporting that prioritizes transparency, accountability, and measurable value.

At the same time, several states have restricted ESG-related terminology in investment and procurement practices. This patchwork creates contradictory expectations, leaving companies navigating an uncharted landscape that varies by geography, industry and stakeholder group.

Public sentiment mirrors these divides. While most U.S. consumers still expect companies to act responsibly on climate change, diversity, and community impact, a vocal minority resists "ESG" and "DEI" labels, making language a flashpoint in the national debate.

The language evolution

In response, many companies are rethinking how they apply language and remain focused on business objectives, strategy and stakeholder expectations. While the work on social impact continues, the acronyms "ESG" and "DEI" are increasingly absent from public-facing communications. Instead, organizations frame their initiatives around terms such as "responsible business," "resilience," "inclusion and belonging," and "talent development."

In the environmental space, companies emphasize "energy security," "supply chain resilience," and "responsible growth" – acceptable phrases that flow seamlessly across political lines. Social initiatives are described in terms of "career pathways," "economic empowerment," and "community impact."

This evolution is not about walking away from substance. It reflects a need for more adaptive language to withstand partisan scrutiny while keeping diverse stakeholders engaged.

Key challenges

Communicators face a dual challenge: being transparent enough to maintain credibility, while managing the risks of political or reputational backlash. Companies want to lead with ambitious goals, but overpromising or using language perceived as politicized can create significant policy and economic vulnerabilities.

Reporting requirements add to the complexity. U.S. companies must align with federal mandates, international frameworks, and rising investor and NGO expectations while managing competing priorities.

Where companies are focusing

Despite turbulence in federal and state oversight, companies remain committed to climate and governance goals. Many are recalibrating timelines or highlighting near-term, visible progress, such as investing in renewable energy on-site or diversifying supplier networks rather than far-off net-zero pledges.

On the social side, companies are shifting from broad DEI statements to initiatives tied more closely to workforce development, talent pipelines, and local community investment.

Counsel for companies

Our guidance to U.S. companies is threefold:

1. **Adapt your language:** Communicate commitments using terminology that resonates broadly and avoids unnecessary political triggers.
2. **Anchor in materiality:** Focus on the issues most relevant to your market sector and stakeholder expectations, backed by data.
3. **Integrate storytelling:** Weave purpose and social impact into broader narratives about resilience, innovation, and long-term value creation, rather than treating it as a siloed report.

Communicators face a dual challenge: being transparent enough to maintain credibility, while managing the risks of political or reputational backlash.

During the next two to three years, we expect three apparent shifts in ESG communications:

- **Regulatory rigor:** The SEC's climate disclosure rule will encourage companies to provide more transparent and consistent reporting on sustainability.
- **Rise of *responsible business* framing:** Companies will continue to use language that conveys impact while avoiding politicized acronyms.
- **Integration into business strategy:** ESG will no longer be an "add-on," with C-Suite oversight; it will be embedded into investor relations, risk management, and workforce engagement.

Media dynamics

The U.S. media landscape has also adapted. National outlets now cover ESG primarily through the lenses of politics, regulation, supply chain, and shareholder value. Trade publications focus on practical implementation and benchmarks, while local media highlight tangible community benefits, such as job creation or local investment.

Many leaders are not abandoning sustainability — they're embedding it into their core strategy and communicating it with precision so they can stay transparent, resilient, and trusted in an increasingly polarized environment.

Conclusion

The U.S. perspective on ESG communications is one of adaptation. Companies are not abandoning their principles; they are reframing how they present them. The goal is to remain credible, transparent, and fact-oriented while navigating an increasingly polarized environment. For communicators, the challenge and the opportunity are to help corporations and NGOs tell their stories in ways that inspire trust, demonstrate resilience, and connect with stakeholders across divides.

LAMBERT by LLYC

ESG's Evolution in the **U.S.** Reflects Both Current Moment & Long-Term Whiplash

Don Hunt
Partner and U.S. Head of Corporate Affairs
Lambert by LLYC

This spring, the State of Texas removed asset management firm BlackRock from a "divestment list" that had banned state public investment with the firm.

BlackRock had spent three years on that list due to ESG policies Texas claimed "boycotted energy companies." BlackRock was restored to the good graces of the Lone Star State by stepping back from the Climate Action 100+ group and loudly backtracking from related positions.

The same policy reversals that helped BlackRock get back into Texas sparked issues abroad, as a major Netherlands pension fund recently pulled $17 billion in assets from the company. The fund, PFZW, expressed concerns that BlackRock wasn't acting in the best interests of clients when it comes to climate risk.

Meanwhile this summer, more than 20 U.S. states have warned BlackRock and JPMorgan that "woke investing" environmental programs will jeopardize the investing giants' access to those states. In issuing these warnings, states called on the firms to completely abandon ESG goals.

Any discussion of the current state of ESG for U.S. businesses should acknowledge that the ideological whiplash around the topic isn't new. Well before the current Trump administration, there were endless debates on if and how the private sector should engage on such broad societal questions.

Should Acme Widgets accept a role in slowing climate change or driving gender equity, even if it meant shipping fewer widgets next quarter? At the time, the idea seemed to go against the 1990s dogma of measuring added shareholder value down to the economic return on each office chair or file cabinet.

Yet, many companies still loudly pursued ESG, and for many reasons. Sometimes ESG engagement was driven by regulatory or shareholder pressures, sometimes from employees or customers. And yes, sometimes ESG policies were pursued by boards as the right thing to do: the cost of doing business on planet Earth.

That history is important because regardless of why companies engaged with ESG, we now have decades of data showing how and where ESG ideas and bottom-line business metrics can converge. The recognition that purpose and profit can co-exist informs much of the relevant activity underway now, even if boards may be a bit hesitant about shouting it from the mountain tops.

As BlackRock illustrates, many companies have trimmed back both their ESG engagement and the way they talk about how their efforts have evolved. Sometimes the shifts come from a fear of political and social blowback. But other times, companies drop ESG because it was never an authentic part of their operation or culture, and the current moment comes as a relief.

It wasn't necessarily a surprise to see brands such as John Deere, Wal-Mart or even Ford move away from DEI, for instance. Similarly, it was on brand for Apple, Ben & Jerry's and Patagonia to restate their commitment to their DEI policies.

In many ways we are currently seeing two different forms of ESG in the U.S. There is **ESG as the loud political Rorschach test,** with right and left both seeing what they want to see and claiming endless evil or boundless good in programs. Then, there is the actual less-loud work being done: **ESG as business strategy.** Some are calling it "ESG 2.0" but that may overstate how planned the path has been.

In any event, where ESG is still taking place under the term "ESG," many companies have shifted away from declarations of social transformation in favor of introspective work on risk/change management. The scope of ESG has narrowed as the social pressures and economic incentives have flipped. Companies must now avoid anti-woke boycotts from the right while dealing with the end of tax credits for electric vehicles and clean fuels.

Today's ESG in the U.S. is more likely to include business-impact questions around current-era sustainability concerns, including AI adoption, trade chaos and global politics. Less common are highly visible commitments to causes outside of a P&L. For instance, directors are more likely to consider insurance ramifications from rising sea levels or storm frequency versus taking a position on the Paris Accords.

Communicating during this shift doesn't mean casting all efforts in a pure mercenary business framework. As always, any message must be authentic to an organization's history, foundational brand attributes and established culture.

Any discussion of the current state of ESG for U.S. businesses should acknowledge that the ideological whiplash around the topic isn't new. Well before the current Trump administration, there were endless debates on if and how the private sector should engage on such broad societal questions.

Additionally, as the BlackRock challenge in the Netherlands illustrates, even as anti-ESG pressures rise in the U.S., the global picture is much different. Companies who do business internationally (or who aspire to) would do well to think twice before any wholesale abandonment of ESG. Decisions made to appease domestic regulators could spark unintended problems with three others in another hemisphere.

Even within the U.S. itself, we are seeing polarization play out among states, as some embrace "greenhushing" legislation discouraging climate reporting or consideration. Meanwhile, California and New York have pursued legislation mandating greater corporate disclosure of emissions and climate risk. These increasing pressures are a critical reminder to companies and communicators that despite the biggest headlines, all politics remains local.

While it is easy to get caught up in the whiplash of ideology and politics when discussing ESG, the components that drive demonstrated organizational growth remain durable. A 2025 CFO survey by BDO USA showed 64% of CFOs believe ESG adoption will improve their company's long-term performance. This data would suggest there is a business case for the "why" around ESG.

In the U.S. today, the foundational messages around ESG have shifted inward to business growth versus global responsibility. But companies and professionals communicating different aspects of ESG should ensure, first and foremost, their message is going to age well and travel well in support of their brand and their culture, regardless of who holds what future political office.

Just as early predictions of ESG's eventual ubiquity were wrong, so are any current predictions of its demise. Even in Texas.

Ready to Communicate Your Impact?

Connect with your local PROI partner to explore how our experts can help you navigate the changing dynamics of ESG and impact communications.

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