

# Promoting Climate Action to Key Stakeholders

## A Communications Guide for Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises

You may have taken only a few steps on the path toward running a more sustainable, climate-forward business, or perhaps you're already running a carbon-neutral, zero-waste operation that incorporates all 17 of the [UN's Sustainable Development Goals](#). Wherever your business sits on this spectrum, it's important to talk openly about it—for the sake of transparency and good marketing.

In today's world, business leaders who aren't responding in some way to the climate crisis risk seeing their brand labelled as behind the times, out of touch with reality—even irresponsible. More consumers are taking the time to research how and where products are made, even investigating parent companies, political ties, donation plans, supply chains, manufacturing operations and workforce treatment, sustainability initiatives and other aspects that matter to them before committing to a sale.

On the flip side, enterprises making a public effort to reduce their carbon footprint or advertise how their operations or products are becoming more sustainable often see beneficial results, including:

- Positive media coverage
- Positive reviews in online forums (Yelp, Google, Reddit, Amazon, blogs, etc.)
- Positive dialogue on social media (Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.)
- Positive word of mouth

This, in turn, can potentially lead to:

- Increased loyalty among current clients and partners
- New customers
- New partnerships, investors or funding opportunities
- New products or expanded services

Telling others about your organization's climate action goals (even if you haven't yet reached them) along with your achievements is a great value-add. But how can you do this effectively?

### **Facts and Figures Are Important, but Stories Are More Effective**

This guide offers simple, straightforward recommendations regarding how SME leaders can share their vision for climate action through a variety of channels, all while ensuring a consistent message and a strong narrative.

# Communications Plan

## Goals

Setting goals for both your climate actions AND how you plan to communicate them to your stakeholders can provide motivation to help you achieve them and to share the good news about your success.

When developing your goals, remember to use the SMART formula: Simple, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Time-based. This proven approach to designing objectives serves as an effective framework and can help you achieve milestones and success along the way, evaluate your results and share information in a way that will resonate with stakeholders.

Communication goals should be simple and to the point. If you try to communicate too many things at once, the message will inevitably become confusing or diluted. Focus on one major achievement or even a single goal that your company is setting (i.e., Become carbon-neutral by 2025).

Think about what will resonate externally; while you may be excited about a new sustainability-oriented COO hire or a new system that will streamline your fulfilment process, your audiences may not share your enthusiasm. Try to promote what is tangible, visible and easy for your audience to understand.

Focus on both your “Home Game” and “Away Game” climate actions. Here are some examples of communications goals you might like to set for your organization.

We will share that:

- We’ve reduced our properties’ energy use by 50% since January 2018.
- We’ve acquired a new fleet of hybrid delivery vehicles.
- Our soon-to-be-released product will have zero carbon footprint.

Now document your company’s communications goals:

- Goal 1 :
- Goal 2 :
- Goal 3 :

## Target Audiences

Don’t just write “everyone.” Some aspects of your communications strategy will hold mass appeal, but it’s important to tailor your message to reach a specific audience. In order to identify multiple audiences that make sense for your business, spend some time thinking about and analyzing the characteristics of your existing community, which may include employees, potential employees, clients, investors, members of the media, prospects and more. You may also want to consider ideal personas—clients you would like to attract—and think about what they’re like, what they care about and how to reach them.

Now determine and describe your target audiences and articulate how you will communicate with them:

- Target audience 1 :
- Target audience 2 :
- Target audience 3 :

## Key Messages

This is where storytelling comes into play. Let's say your business has just made its entire delivery service carbon-neutral and you have plans to reduce the energy used in your production facilities within a few years. Great! Why should people want to do more than give you a thumbs up and move on?

As the world's biggest brands know, details matter—but not up front. Apple is about much more than computers. Nike is about much more than sneakers. Your company is about more than its products.

When coming up with your key messages—the talking points you'll be repeating in all of your promotional outreach—try to think big. For instance:

- Are you the first company to reach, or even try to achieve, this goal?
- Are you setting a precedent in your industry?
- Are you changing how things have always been done?
- What do your steps toward climate action signify beyond a reduction in energy use? Are you bringing a community together or looking beyond the bottom line?

The more you can tap into the human side of your messaging, the greater chance it will resonate with your audience—whether journalists, customers or prospects.

Example: Bob's Coffee Shops are now powered by 100% renewable energy; this investment makes Bob's Coffee Shops the only carbon-neutral restaurant franchise in Winnipeg; Bob's Coffee Shops is leading its sector into new, climate-conscious territory by switching to clean energy.

Now determine your key messages:

- Key message 1:
- Key message 2:
- Key message 3:

## Communications Strategies

Keep in mind that the techniques and platforms you use to connect with your client base will be different from those you use to reach potential investors, new clients, donors, government representatives etc.

**Here are just some of the tools and strategies you can use to communicate your climate action wins (there are many more that you can leverage, but these are some of the most commonly used):**

**Printed marketing materials** – This approach to disseminating information is often considered old-fashioned (and it's the least eco-friendly) but can be useful in certain circumstances, especially: neighbourhood events, conventions or conferences, in-store promotions, etc. Pros: Some audiences prefer a piece of paper they can keep on their desk or in their bag; in places where people are unlikely to be on their phones or laptops, or where they're standing in a line, they might be more likely to see a poster/flyer. Cons: Outdoor flyers can be ruined by rain/wind/etc.; less potential to reach large audiences.

**Email or text marketing campaigns** – These strategies are ideal if you're trying to share news with your existing customer base, assuming a large segment of them have granted their permission (implied or explicit) to receive online communications from your business. (See [CASL](#), Canada's Anti-Spam Legislation, to learn the rules, which include the ability to unsubscribe at any time). The downside is that you can't reach new audiences this way unless there is an incentive for those already receiving your emails to forward them to friends, family and coworkers. Email campaigns are great for when you want

to let your inner circle know about your climate action first (it's also a great way to test the waters to see what kind of reaction you'll get).

**Social media promotion** – Practically a must in today's world. Not only does social media let you reach current followers, it provides the opportunity—if you're telling a powerful story—for your followers to share it with their networks, too. You can also make sure your message is seen by others on these networks through sponsored (or “boosted”) posts, a form of digital advertising that's typically affordable. The opportunities and restrictions differ slightly from platform to platform, but many, such as Facebook, allow you to select a target audience based on a variety of factors such as location, areas of interest, age group, etc., which makes for refined and effective outreach. Keep in mind that social media algorithms favour content with strong visuals.

**Paid media** – If your company has a significant announcement to make, you may wish to place an ad in a newspaper or on reputable, trusted news sites. Sometimes it's a small notice in the classifieds section, other times it's a full-page “article” that a company spokesperson has written and paid the newspaper to run as an advertorial (this means it resembles the other articles in the publication but comes with fine print letting readers know it's sponsored content). Similar paid media is prevalent online, where bloggers or “influencers” are paid by a company to review a product/service or give space on their site for guest articles. This communications strategy is appealing to many businesses, as it allows for control over the messaging; however, the costs for these placements are often quite high and—because readers may be aware that it's a paid advertisement—they may also be less likely to trust the message.

**Media release** – A media release, also referred to as a news release or press release, is a good tool to use if your goal is to inform journalists about your climate action in hopes of generating media coverage. Releases may be distributed through newswire agencies (not an insignificant fee!), but while the message will land in the inboxes of many journalists, there is no guarantee that any of them will decide to cover your story (in most cases, they do not). You may wish to research and develop your own media list by searching online and compiling a distribution list of local or national media. A media release makes the most sense within the context of a comprehensive media outreach plan, often lead by a public or media relations specialist. To access a template media release, click [here](#).

**Earned media** – By far one of the best ways to share your climate action story and help it get noticed is to proactively pitch it to members of the media who cover relevant topics such as finance, local small business, your particular industry, sustainability, green living, clean-tech etc. Think about the value of the story to your audiences, craft your key messages and identify other spokespeople you can put forward to be involved in your story (such as ambassadors or loyal customers). Research relevant members of the media online, craft your media release or outreach plan, send out your release to a distribution list you've developed, then consider helping to move the story along by following up directly by email or phone.

Which strategies appeal to you and which make sense for your company's climate action story?

- Printed marketing materials (flyers, posters, in-store advertising, handouts at events)
- Email marketing campaigns (internal/external newsletters)
- Social media promotions (sponsored or boosted posts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.)
- Paid media (press release, sponsored blog posts, paid editorial content)
- Earned media (coverage in newspapers, magazines, online news sites, radio, television, etc.)

## Timeline & Ownership

Depending on the complexity of your outreach plan, it's helpful to organize in advance when each communications strategy will be deployed and who will be in charge of managing each step.

It goes without saying that you don't want to post on Facebook about your company's latest accomplishment, let a few months go by, and then say the same thing to your network via email.

To ensure success in your communications, create a solid plan, coordinate messaging across platforms and empower the right people to manage this in a timely manner.

- Determine who will create content and who will review and approve content.
- Build a schedule for the timed release of your messages on the various channels you've prioritized (this might include an internal/soft-launch phase, or you might want an all-at-once blitz).
- Determine who will take the lead on each aspect of your plan, and who will project-manage according to the deadlines you've set.
- Evaluate the success of your outreach after it's wrapped up and use the lessons learned in subsequent strategies.

You may want to use project management software, or create a plan document from scratch in a format that works best for you.

## Be Creative

Remember: Entire books have been written about the communications strategies listed here and, not surprisingly, each business has its own unique advantages and challenges when it comes to telling a climate action story in a way that reaches the right people, at the right time, with the right message. There is no one-size-fits-all approach, and the more proactive planning and effective strategies you use to share your positive climate action story, the more traction it is likely to get.

**For information on examples of climate action by Manitoba business and to access tools and resources for taking climate action, visit the Climate Action Toolkit for Manitoba Business**

<https://mbchamber.mb.ca/climate-change-action-toolkit-for-manitoba-business/>.

## About the Partners

**The Manitoba Chambers of Commerce** was established in 1931 and is the umbrella organization for Manitoba's chamber movement. With a membership comprised of local chambers of commerce as well as direct corporate members, the MCC is Manitoba's largest business lobby, representing more than 10,000 businesses and community leaders. Its mission is to champion sustainable economic growth leading to greater prosperity for business and communities in Manitoba.

 [mbchamber.mb.ca](https://mbchamber.mb.ca)

 [mbchambersofcom](https://twitter.com/mbchambersofcom)

**The International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD)** is an independent think tank championing sustainable solutions to 21st-century problems. Our mission is to promote human development and environmental sustainability. We do this through research, analysis and knowledge products that support sound policy-making. Our big-picture view allows us to address the root causes of some of the greatest challenges facing our planet today: ecological destruction, social exclusion, unfair laws and economic rules, a changing climate. IISD's staff of over 120 people, plus over 50 associates and 100 consultants, come from across the globe and from many disciplines. Our work affects lives in nearly 100 countries. Part scientist, part strategist—IISD delivers the knowledge to act.

*Financial support provided by Environment and Climate  
Change Canada through the Climate Action Fund.*

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