

ESG Trailblazer Jamie Richards
shares key learnings on how to build a more sustainable business

ONE

Find your voice, scale it up

Be the voice of sustainability. I made myself the point person for all sustainability work, because many people don't have this specific education.

I presented on sustainability at the quarterly All Hands, then the CEO asked if I could create a sustainability plan for the next five years...and it really moved from there.

For a long time, people would come to my desk to ask if something was recyclable, because that's really what everyone knew about sustainability. But as we did more education sessions, people were so interested because they'd never heard about any of this before.

TWO

Work within the business model

Have a mindset that builds a sustainable business model; as it becomes more efficient, it will become more profitable. I never actually saw sustainability as something separate. It should always be intertwined.

Work with what you've got. Think creatively and understand the business model and the metrics, and you'll reduce a lot of costs. A lot of the time, sustainability initiatives focus on spending, but it really doesn't have to be expensive.

We were able to do all of this with amika + Eva NYC with no budget—except for my headcount. This will be the first year I'll do some partnerships because I have money. Before, I had to knock on the brand team's door and get some limited funding for small things. I had to be very boot-strapped. We had to be able to do everything within margin.

THREE

Bring people with you

Help people understand why it's important and build a reputation based on relevant data. For 3–4 years, it was a lot of education, 5 minutes at All Hands with a little lesson on 'Here's carbon emissions, here's what's important, here's exactly what it looks like for us, and this is what you need to watch out for this year'.

Compromise and build partnerships. I was so terrified about the business dropping sustainability because it was so hard, that I was always willing to find a solution. And if that didn't work, I'd try to find the next solution. That's still how we approach it.

I have built a reputation; people know I'm not going to recommend something for the supply chain or spend money, unless the risk is high. I have a better understanding now of where we can go, so I can focus more on what I think would be most beneficial for the brand.

FOUR

Be a better business partner

I sit on the Board and hold my own with anything related to ESG. But it was hard to not to know about S&OP, P&L, and SG&A. So, I asked the CFO to walk me through our P&L. They've always been really receptive, because it makes me a better business partner for them.

Likewise, for marketers, it's important to build 'ESG Fluency'. To do this well, there is a lot of data to substantiate, and then utilize through storytelling. Data tells you where your emissions are and where to put your money, which really matters.

I see a lot of marketers moving into sustainability. We can learn a lot on the job, but sometimes marketers are missing some basic sustainability knowledge, like metrics. I've become a lot more targeted now that I have been in the business and understand more about how this works. Marketers can likewise upskill in sustainability.

FIVE

Future-proof your business

Keep current. I look at everything from National Geographic to new science, news, articles, legislation, Reuters, Mintel, etc. At least an hour a week. A lot of organizations, such as international law firm Eversheds Sutherland, are summarizing legislative changes and helping other companies navigate this landscape because it is so new.

Find your internal partners. Regulatory and legal teams tend to focus more on human safety than environmental safety. So we have a partnership. Over time, I've been able to narrow the scope of what we need to keep current.

I pick the topics that are going to be most relevant to the company, i.e., I identify what's going on in the world, and in science, news, and TV news, and then I am able to say: how is that actually going to show up in that business and how do you future-proof yourself?

SIX

Earn your place in the business

Now it's baked into the brand positioning, the brand DNA, but that took about 2-3 years of knocking on doors, raising my hand, saying I could do this for you, and the only cost is my time. I did a lot of internal pitches!

Now the brands ask: what are we doing; what are we partnering on; and what are our goals for this year? The conversation has really changed, but it took two years to establish the value and resources that I can bring to the brand. Because this is an entirely new science that we're bringing to the business.

We are not a consciously founded brand. This didn't exist four years ago; these brands are over 10 years old! We've only recently changed the brand to bake in sustainability. So it can be done.