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# Telling Your Hotel's "Green" Story: Developing an Effective Communication Strategy to Convey Environmental Values

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# Telling Your Hotel's "Green" Story: Developing an Effective Communication Strategy to Convey Environmental Values

## **Abstract**

Many lodging companies are spending substantial time and money on environmental initiatives. Often these firms do not get the support, recognition, and respect they deserve for their efforts. Based on a study of the "green" communications of 90 hospitality organizations, this tool provides practical guidelines to help hospitality firms develop effective communication strategies to explain environmental initiatives to employees, customers, clients, owners, franchisees, investors, and other important audiences. A sound communication strategy should tell a compelling story about the company's environmental values, goals, programs and practices. This tool compares and contrasts three green story lines: the environmental story, the financial story, and the service story. It then explains seven focus patterns through which each story can be told. Each of these patterns has a different dynamic between communicator and audience: teacher-student, coach-player, friend-friend, salesperson-customer, cheerleader-fan, host-guest, and statesman-citizen. The tool also discusses four principles to help managers choose the best media, channels, and timing for their communication strategies: combine multiple media, minimize audience effort, encourage audience participation, and retell the story. By applying these guidelines, managers can convince internal and external audiences to actively support, implement, and honor the company's environmental initiatives.

## **Keywords**

Cornell, tools, environmental initiatives, green, sustainability

## **Disciplines**

Hospitality Administration and Management

## **Comments**

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## Telling Your Hotel's "Green" Story: Developing an Effective Communication Strategy to Convey Environmental Values

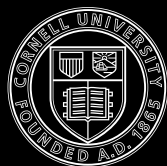
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by Daphne A. Jameson, Ph.D., and Judi Brownell, Ph.D.

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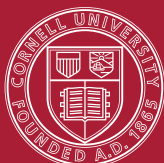
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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**M**any lodging companies are spending substantial time and money on environmental initiatives. Often these firms do not get the support, recognition, and respect they deserve for their efforts. Based on a study of the “green” communications of 90 hospitality organizations, this tool provides practical guidelines to help hospitality firms develop effective communication strategies to explain environmental initiatives to employees, customers, clients, owners, franchisees, investors, and other important audiences. A sound communication strategy should tell a compelling story about the company’s environmental values, goals, programs and practices. This tool compares and contrasts three green story lines: the environmental story, the financial story, and the service story. It then explains seven focus patterns through which each story can be told. Each of these patterns has a different dynamic between communicator and audience: teacher-student, coach-player, friend-friend, salesperson-customer, cheerleader-fan, host-guest, and statesman-citizen. The tool also discusses four principles to help managers choose the best media, channels, and timing for their communication strategies: combine multiple media, minimize audience effort, encourage audience participation, and retell the story. By applying these guidelines, managers can convince internal and external audiences to actively support, implement, and honor the company’s environmental initiatives.



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#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



**Daphne A. Jameson**, Ph.D., is professor of management communication at the Cornell School of Hotel Administration, where she studies and teaches about the ways in which language is used in business, technical, and other professional contexts, with special attention to the hospitality industry (daj2@cornell.edu). Using theories, methods, and epistemologies of the humanities, she has explored how narrative discourse and rhetorical strategy influence management action, financial decision-making, service quality, and organizational ethos. Her interest in the intersection between language and technical subject matter arose from her dual background in mathematics and literature. Her publications include studies of management communication in the restaurant industry, discourse in public debates about convention center location and cost, narrative strategy in investment reports, and the “green” rhetoric of environmental initiatives in the hotel industry. She has also written about the roles that language, symbolism, and storytelling played at Enron, Starbucks, and other corporations.

**Judi Brownell**, Ph.D., is a professor and dean of students at the School of Hotel Administration (jlb18@cornell.edu). Her research projects include studies on managerial listening behavior and the competencies required for global hospitality leaders. She has created tools to assess employee-organization fit and the communication of service values. Her current research focuses on listening as it relates to communicating and maintaining service quality standards in the international cruise industry. Brownell has written several textbooks, published over 80 articles, and serves on several editorial boards. She is also past president of the International Listening Association and has received awards for her research in this field. Brownell has conducted training and consulting for a wide range of hospitality organizations. Among her projects, she has designed assessment centers for hospitality leadership development. A seasoned administrator, Brownell has served as the school's associate dean for academic affairs and as its director for graduate studies. She has also been academic area director for both the organization behavior and management communication disciplines.



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**T**his tool provides practical guidelines managers can use to design and implement communication strategies related to their environmental values and sustainability initiatives. Drawing on the results of our study of the rhetorical approaches used by 90 lodging-industry organizations,<sup>1</sup> we explain how to conceptualize and implement a green communication strategy that will establish credibility and align with an organization’s stated goals. The guidelines offered here will be helpful in many situations that are often found in the hospitality industry, such as the following:

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<sup>1</sup> Daphne A. Jameson and Judi Brownell, “Going Green: How Organizations Use Narrative to Build Commitment to Environmental Values and Action,” in *Discourse Perspectives on Organizational Communication*, ed. Robyn Walker and Jolanta Aritz (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2011), pp. 225-260.



- A hotel general manager wants to convince employees to implement water conservation measures, but the employees resist;
- A corporate vice president rolls out a system-wide green program, but customers take little notice, because so many firms are touting their sustainability efforts;
- A marketing manager introduces a “green meetings” program, but business clients show little interest and corporate meeting planners are skeptical;
- A corporate executive wants to persuade hotel owners to invest in energy-saving equipment, but they refuse; and
- A public relations officer wants to redesign the company website to highlight sustainability efforts and achievements but cannot find the right combination of words, photos, and symbols to convey the message.

In such situations, the communicator can use the guidelines that follow to help design and implement a systematic communication strategy built around a compelling story related to the firm’s sustainability efforts. First, we describe what a green communication strategy consists of; then we explain why such a strategy is needed; and finally, we show how to choose among alternative approaches to create a communication strategy that will tell your organization’s green story effectively. With this tool, you will be able to design and execute your green communications strategy.

### What Is a “Green” Communication Strategy?

A good communication strategy delivers an accurate message about an organization’s values, goals, programs, and practices in a systematic, coordinated way through appropriate communication media and channels. A green communication strategy specifically concerns the organization’s values, goals, programs, and practices regarding the natural environment and resources. An effective communication strategy molds relevant facts and details into a coherent, true story in the form of a logical or thematically connected sequence of real events.

After a flourish in the 1970s, the environmental movement has seen renewed public interest in recent years. For this reason, corporate communications about environmental issues have accelerated in the past decade. An increasing number of companies publish reports about their environmental conservation actions and mention “greenness” or sustainability in advertising. Often, however, these communications seem more reactive than strategic. In many cases, green communications could be more carefully planned to influence the perceptions and opinions of specific target audiences.

### Why You Need a Green Communication Strategy

The lodging industry spends substantial money, time, and effort on environmental initiatives, such as installing

energy-saving equipment, rethinking work processes, asking guests to participate in green programs, and adopting environmental causes. To get the support, recognition, and impact that such initiatives deserve, lodging companies must communicate effectively with a wide array of both internal and external audiences: employees, customers, investors, the media, and the general public.

It's not easy to achieve support and recognition for such initiatives. To find out why, we explored how organizations in the lodging industry communicated their environmental values, programs, and practices to a variety of audiences. Using the framework of rhetorical and narrative theory, we analyzed the language through which hospitality organizations explained their values and actions related to protecting the environment and achieving sustainability, defined as a balance between the depletion and renewal of natural resources.

Our research identified numerous challenges that organizations face. For instance, the wide array of audiences may have competing interests or different levels of knowledge. Some green communications fail to persuade because they rely on platitudes about "saving Mother Earth." Others are not engaging because they direct attention away from local conservation issues. Some messages undercut credibility when they mix profit motives with altruistic ones. These and other communication problems open the organizations to criticism for "greenwashing," that is, minimizing significant environmental problems by focusing solely on solutions to superficial ones.

Having a green communication strategy is important because environmental changes are often invisible. An experimental study conducted here at Cornell, for instance, found that when hotels install energy saving features, many guests do not even notice. This study compared guests' perceptions of quality in hotel rooms with and without energy saving lighting and equipment.<sup>2</sup> The good news is that the changes did not lower guests' satisfaction; the bad news is that guests did not notice the hotel's environmental efforts.

Another reason to have a sound communication strategy is shown by another Cornell study that found that consumers are highly skeptical of companies' announcements of sustainability initiatives.<sup>3</sup> However, this study also found that the way in which announcements are conveyed, for instance with or without reference to competitors' initiatives, can increase or decrease skepticism. What this means

is that you must choose the right communication strategy to increase credibility.

Those are your challenges. Now let's build a strategy for how you and your organization can get buy in from employees, guests, clients, owners, franchisees, investors, and others for your environmental programs, as well as get well-deserved credit and public recognition for your green initiatives and sustainability achievements.

## How Can You Best Design a Green Communication Strategy?

To help you create an effective green communication strategy, we offer an action plan, based on our study, that will apply to a wide variety of corporate- and property-level situations. Designing a green communication strategy involves three key steps: choosing a story line, focusing the story, and deciding when and where to tell the story.

### Step 1: Choose a Green Story Line

The first step in designing a communication strategy is to choose a relevant story line, which we define as a sequence of connected actions that people have performed, are performing, or will perform in order to advance a particular goal or resolve a particular problem. In the specific case of a green communication strategy, a story line means a coherent, accurate account of why and how your company has already transformed or will soon transform its environmental values into particular actions.

Our research identified three overall story lines that increase commitment to environmental values and participation in related initiatives. We call these the environmental story, the financial story, and the service story. After giving an example of each story line, we explain its advantages and disadvantages.

### THE ENVIRONMENTAL STORY

The environmental story is an account of how a business enterprise directly affects or has been affected by the natural world. The events that constitute the environmental story line include such actions as honoring nature, making sacrifices to help restore nature, and creating programs to enhance nature, thus compensating for past excessive consumption of natural resources. The symbols associated with the environmental story, such as those drawn from Native American traditions or Arthurian legends, often have spiritual overtones. Through such symbols, the environmental story appeals to audience members' emotions by making them feel virtuous as they make an altruistic commitment to environmental values and initiatives.

A good example of how one lodging company has used an environmental story line is Marriott's communication regarding its signature partnership to restore one part of the endangered Amazon rainforest. In 2008 Marriott announced

<sup>2</sup> Alex M. Susskind and Rohit Verma, "Hotel Guests' Reactions to Guest Room Sustainability Initiatives," *Cornell Hospitality Reports*, Vol. 11, No. 6 (2011).

<sup>3</sup> Michael Giebelhausen and HaeEun Helen Chun, "Reversing the Green Backlash: Why Large Hospitality Companies Should Welcome Credibly Green Competitors," *Cornell Hospitality Reports*, Vol. 11, No. 14 (2011).

that the centerpiece of its environmental strategy would be to work with partners to raise \$6 million to fund an environmental management plan for 1.4 million acres in the Juma Sustainability Reserve. The website devoted to telling this “Spirit to Preserve” story has evolved since 2008, adding videos and additional materials, but consistently retaining the environmental story approach.<sup>4</sup> Narrators include Marriott’s chief executive officer, chief financial officer, and executive vice president. The story line connects the narrators to the audience by asking employees, customers, and corporate clients to join the partnership with Marriott, the Brazilian government, and the Amazonas Sustainable Foundation to raise the funds.

The rationale for this geographically and culturally distant program was that protecting the rainforest compensated for the corporation’s energy use. The website discusses how the corporation has calculated its “carbon footprint” and gives audience members a way to calculate their own footprints. The familiar metaphor of a footprint to signify a technical calculation about energy consumption makes the concept seem more accessible and human. By offering a personal footprint calculation option, the website provides an immediate participation mechanism and makes the audience a part of the environmental story.

Choosing an environmental story similar to Marriott’s allows you to capitalize on the public’s heightened awareness of environmental issues and expressed willingness to participate in green initiatives.<sup>5</sup> In addition this story connects with dramatic visual imagery of nature and compelling symbolism.

The environmental story does have some potential disadvantages. First, this approach might not differentiate your company from competitors because today so many promote themselves as having green programs. Another disadvantage is that an environmental story may invite skepticism if the audience believes that your true motives are financial. This could happen, for instance, if the green program seems superficial or shifts costs to others. To prevent such skepticism, some hotels give guests a discount for declining housekeeping service or contribute part of the savings to an environmental cause. According to an experimental study, it may be more credible and effective to donate to the environmental cause first than to make the donation contingent upon guests’ participation in a linen reuse program.<sup>6</sup> If you choose

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<sup>4</sup> “Marriott’s Strategy for Contributing to Environmental Conservation,” Marriott International, viewed January 7, 2012, <http://www.marriott.com/corporate-social-responsibility/corporate-environmental-responsibility.mi>.

<sup>5</sup> Susskind and Verma, *op.cit.*

<sup>6</sup> Noah J. Goldstein, Vladas Griskevicius and Robert B. Cialdini, “Invoking Social Norms: A Social Psychology Perspective on Improving Hotels’ Linen-Reuse Programs,” *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly* 48 (2007): 145-150.

## Green Communication Strategy, Step 1

Explain your sustainability program using one or more of three “story lines”:

- An Environmental Story,
- A Financial Story, or
- A Service Story.

to tell an environmental story, therefore, look for ways to distinguish your program and to increase your credibility.

### THE FINANCIAL STORY

Another way to create shared meanings and develop a collective understanding of and commitment to environmental initiatives is to draw attention to their financial impact. The financial story is an account of how lodging organizations have used or could use environmental initiatives to reduce costs or increase revenues. Actions in a typical financial story line include selecting program options, running pilot studies, calculating their impact, and then, if they succeed, implementing them fully. The financial story celebrates these actions as ethical and proper, not greedy or materialistic. The institutional pressure to “go green” is portrayed as a positive economic force.

The symbolism interwoven into the financial story often conveys the themes of success and achievement. For instance, the American Hotel and Lodging Association’s logo for its Good Earthkeeping program is a star, conveying the idea that hotel managers can be stars in their own organization if they use environmental programs to save money or establish new marketing opportunities. The financial story shows how economic enlightenment—using environmental initiatives to enhance profit—can meet the audience members’ emotional needs to feel appreciated by their organizations, recognized for their achievements, and successful in their professions. Of course, an approach based on financial impact is not well suited to all situations and backfires if misapplied.

Good examples of the financial story approach are found in the extensive communications distributed by the Green Hotels Association (GHA). Founded in 1993, the GHA is a group of several hundred hotels that are interested in environmental initiatives. In its membership materials, the GHA emphasizes the financial rationale for environmental action by highlighting its goals of helping hotels save money and make money. The association provides its members with extensive information about all types of environmental initiatives. One section of the 151-page *Membership Conservation Guidelines and Ideas* manual, for instance, weaves together a story about the positive impact of environmental programs in the lodging industry, including concrete examples of the how different organizations realized financial savings.<sup>7</sup> The sources are carefully documented, some from research organizations, some from publications, some from company reports, and some from GHA’s own surveys.

The financial approach has the signal advantage of being straightforward. Economics is both a driving force

<sup>7</sup> Green Hotels Association, *Membership Conservation Guidelines and Ideas* (Houston, TX: GHA, 2008).

and a serious constraint in sustainability initiatives, as has been explored at several recent industry conferences.<sup>8</sup> Thus, telling a financial story can enhance your firm’s credibility. In addition, a financial story motivates managers and others who have vested interests, such as employees who participate in stock ownership plans or who receive bonuses tied to financial results or achievement of sustainability goals.

The financial story also has potential disadvantages. If employees do not feel that they directly benefit from the company’s financial results, this approach can backfire. Telling the financial story can also invite skepticism because the claimed results are often inflated or not well documented. Thus, if you choose to tell a financial story about your environmental initiatives, it is important to provide solid evidence and, if possible, ensure that the audience will benefit directly.

### THE SERVICE STORY

The third story line we observed focuses on service: giving people what they want, which includes environmental accountability. This story line often concerns service provided to hotel guests or clients, but sometimes is broadened to encompass service to employees, investors, or the general public because they, too, express preferences for green practices. The service story appeals to the audience’s emotions by making them feel important: Their desires are paramount.

A good example of the service story approach is found in the linen-reuse communication used by Wyndham Worldwide. Rather than the typical message asking guests to save the planet by conserving water and energy (an environmental story), Wyndham’s message concerns service. In short, the hotel is giving guests what they asked for: the option to reuse linen and towels rather than having them automatically replaced every day. Guest communications from Wyndham’s EarthSmart program take this approach: “At Wyndham, we know that many of our guests are interested in helping to protect the natural resources of our planet. That’s why we’ve instituted a new program—EarthSmart.” The visual symbolism connected with the service story often focuses on luxury, such as beautiful linens, or peacefulness, such as a sleeping child.

The service story is a particularly good choice when the audience includes people with dramatically different attitudes towards green initiatives. Guests can understand Wyndham’s service initiative, even if they don’t agree with the green message. This message also appeals to the many

<sup>8</sup> Glenn Withiam, “The Challenge of Hotel and Restaurant Sustainability: Finding Profit in ‘Being Green,’” *Cornell Hospitality Roundtable and Conference Proceedings*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (2011). Cornell Center for Hospitality Research; and “Sustaining the Right Balance: Dispelling Myths About Green Initiatives for Hospitality and Gaming,” report of webcast broadcast March 2010. Cornell Center for Hospitality Research.

guests who are ambivalent, wanting to stay at a green hotel but without sacrificing convenience or paying a premium.<sup>9</sup> Telling a service story meets a variety of guests' desires and also exemplifies the traditional service attitude of the hospitality industry.

The service story's chief disadvantage is that it lacks the altruistic theme and dramatic visual imagery of the environmental story. It also lacks the professional success theme and quantitative evidence of the financial story. Furthermore, this approach may create service expectations that the hotel cannot or does not intend to fulfill.

In summary, each of these three overall types of green stories has advantages and disadvantages. In deciding which approach to use, you will want to consider what type of appeal best suits the audience with whom you want to communicate. Note that each story has an underlying emotional dimension. The environmental story meets audience members' need to feel virtuous, the financial story meets their need to feel successful, and the service story meets their need to feel important.

### Step 2: Focus the Story

Once you have chosen a story that suits your purpose, you will need to decide exactly how to tell it as a part of your communication strategy. Every story can be told by numerous communicators to a wide variety of audiences. For instance, the environmental story of Marriott's Amazon rainforest initiative could be told by the chief executive to investors, by a sales manager to corporate meeting planners, by the human resources director to line employees, or by the corporate communications officer to the media. Each of these versions of the story could incorporate the same facts, details, and chronologies, but the shifts in narrator and audience would create different effects. Thus, the second step in the process of designing a green communication strategy is to decide who will tell the story to whom. We refer to the combination of a particular type of narrator with a particular type of audience as a focus pattern.

Sometimes the narrators of green stories are named people, as is the case in Marriott's presentation of its rainforest initiative, but even an unnamed narrator has a voice, personality, and tone. That is the case, for instance, in the Green Hotels Association's and Wyndham EarthSmart's communications.

In our linguistic analysis of the green communications of lodging industry organizations, we identified seven common focus patterns. In the following discussion, we describe and give examples of these seven focus patterns.

Each pattern could be used with any of the three story lines, though some combinations are more common than others.

### THE TEACHER-TO-STUDENT FOCUS PATTERN

The first focus pattern applies an educational approach, in which the narrator addresses the audience as a teacher talking to students. The underlying assumption of this pattern is that if audience members just understand the situation, they will choose to act in a way that the organization wants. The narrator, therefore, does not need to advocate explicitly or use forceful persuasive appeals. Rather than imploring the audience to act, the narrator simply asks them to listen and learn. A story always implies a distance between narrator and audience. This distance can be physical, intellectual, emotional, or related to some other human dimension. The distance in this instance is greater than that of other focus patterns.

A good example of the teacher-student focus pattern is found in the communications of the International Tourism Partnership (ITP).<sup>10</sup> Founded in 1992 by Great Britain's Prince Charles, the ITP is composed of corporate members, including the major hotel chains and travel companies from throughout the world. Its purpose is "to inspire global leaders in the travel and tourism industry on a non-competitive platform, to share knowledge and resources, develop policy and actively implement programmes and initiatives that have a positive impact on social, economic, and environmental issues."<sup>11</sup> The emphasis on avoiding competition is distinctive because other programs often promote environmental initiatives as means of winning competitive advantage.

Among its communications, the ITP has disseminated practical guides that companies can use for environmental initiatives. *Going Green: Minimum Standards Toward a Sustainable Hotel*, an ITP guide for hotel managers, uses the teacher-student focus pattern to explain the concept of a sustainable hotel and developing detailed steps that managers can take to achieve that goal. Environmentalism involves two goals, according to the ITP: to decrease hotels' negative impact on ecosystems and cultures, and to increase hotels' positive contributions by conserving biodiversity, preserving culture, and developing communities. To make these broad, abstract goals concrete, the narrator explains 73 specific steps that hotel managers can take. The extensive instructions, as well as the authoritative tone, suggest an educational setting. The audience is asked to play the role of students listening attentively to a knowledgeable teacher. This teacher-student focus pattern tells an environmental story, but the pattern works equally well for a financial or service story.

<sup>10</sup> See: [www.tourismpartnership.org/](http://www.tourismpartnership.org/).

<sup>11</sup> International Tourism Partnership, *Going Green: Minimum Standards Toward a Sustainable Hotel* (London: ITP, no date), p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Withiam, *op.cit.*

## Green Communication Strategy, Step 2

Frame your story using one or more of seven focus patterns:

- Teacher to Student,
- Coach to Player,
- Friend to Friend,
- Salesperson to Customer,
- Cheerleader to Fan,
- Host to Guest, or
- Statesman to Citizen.

### THE COACH-TO-PLAYER FOCUS PATTERN

The coach-player focus pattern is similar to the teacher-student pattern in that it is hierarchical, but it is different in tone and situation. In this pattern, the narrator's role is primarily to motivate the audience to work together to achieve environmental goals.

Marriott's 2008 corporate social responsibility report exemplifies this focus pattern.<sup>12</sup> The opening letter from the chairman and chief executive officer, J.W. Marriott, Jr., introduces this environmental story by relating how the corporation's employees collaborate with hotel owners, developers, franchisees, suppliers, customers, clients, charitable organizations, and industry groups, such as the International Tourism Partnership. Through words and pictures, the CEO narrator speaks as a coach, inspiring the team and motivating individuals to try even harder. Of the 20 photos in the report, not one features landscapes, wildlife, or other views of nature; instead, each photo shows people working together, taking action on environmental and social initiatives. The report thus also illustrates how a story can be told through both visual and verbal means.

### THE FRIEND-TO-FRIEND FOCUS PATTERN

Whereas the teacher-student and coach-player focus patterns imply a hierarchical relationship between narrator and audience, the friend-to-friend pattern conveys an egalitarian relationship. The narrator speaks as one friend or colleague to another. For instance, the narrator may invite the audience to join friends or coworkers to work on an environmental project or solve a sustainability problem. Motivation comes from the personal peer relationship, and little or no distance exists between the narrator and the audience.

Communications related to Thayer Lodging's Sustainability Standards Program exemplify the friend-friend focus pattern.<sup>13</sup> Thayer, a privately held hotel investment company, owns and manages hotels under the flags of Marriott, Hilton, and others. Writing to the company's managers on a program website, the organizer of the sustainability initiative expresses the idea that both goals and methods in other companies' so-called green programs are ambiguous. So he provides rationales and resources for environmental initiatives and encourages his colleagues to try different approaches because "there is no one right way to be green."<sup>14</sup> The environmental story told through the friend-friend focus pattern depicts the Sustainability Standards Program as a mutual quest for the best ways to conserve and protect

<sup>12</sup> Marriott International, *Social Responsibility & Community Engagement* (Bethesda, MD: Marriott, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> "Sustainability Standards," Thayer Lodging Group, viewed August 15, 2008, <http://www.sstandards.com/home2>.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

nature. Speaking in an informal tone, the narrator assures the managers that they should not worry if everything they try does not immediately succeed; it is the continuing search that matters. The symbolism of the quest, the openness to new ideas, and the reassurance that the company is headed in the right direction all convey that the audience is engaged in important work.

### THE SALESPERSON-TO-CUSTOMER FOCUS PATTERN

This is the first of several focus patterns that imply a distance between narrator and audience, but place the audience above the narrator. In the salesperson-customer pattern, the narrator recognizes and appeals to the audience's needs and concerns, emphasizing the direct benefits to be gained by adopting or supporting green initiatives and programs.

The press kit of Project Planet, an environmental program that has been used in thousands of hotels worldwide and was endorsed by the American Hotel and Lodging Association and various hotel chains, aptly illustrates the salesperson-customer focus pattern.<sup>15</sup> The press kit targets both hotel managers who are considering using the program and journalists at trade publications who are writing about it. The kit tells a financial story through a four-page press release followed by 33 related documents, including magazine and newspaper articles, testimonial letters from hotel managers, and copies of comment cards from hotel customers. Woven together, the press kit components tell a compelling financial story using the salesperson-customer focus pattern.

Project Planet material also demonstrates that the salesperson-customer focus pattern can be used both with internal and external audiences. For internal audiences, the script of the Project Planet video training program stresses how housekeepers and their families will benefit, as part of an environmental story. The general manager in the video asserts that the primary goal of the environmental initiative is to conserve the earth's natural resources for future generations; this reference to future generations makes the program especially relevant to the many housekeeping employees who have children. In addition the video discusses how saving water will ease the burden on community water treatment facilities, a local benefit that will directly affect the hotel staff.

When you are telling your green story to an audience that is skeptical or focused on their own well-being, then the

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<sup>15</sup> "Press Kit," Project Planet, viewed August 5, 2008, <http://www.project-planetcorp.com/>

salesperson-customer focus pattern may be a particularly good choice.

### THE CHEERLEADER-TO-FAN FOCUS PATTERN

The cheerleader-fan focus pattern is similar to the salesperson-customer pattern, but is less intense and assumes less skepticism in the audience. The narrator as cheerleader encourages audience members to be active fans of environmental initiatives and celebrates their successes. Communications that use this pattern often present concrete examples to show what other hotels are doing and then encourage audience members to join the crowd of fans.

Florida's state-sponsored Green Lodging Program uses this focus pattern. Florida's materials include success stories of hotels that have met the requirements to be designated green and thus received the program's benefits, which are stated in financial terms: saving money by cutting costs, receiving free technical assistance to help save even more money, reaching new target markets, gaining free advertising on the program website, and becoming qualified to hold events for state agencies and departments, which the governor's executive order required to use green-designated hotels whenever possible.<sup>16</sup>

Another vivid example of the cheerleader-fan focus pattern occurs in *Our Planet*, an internal environmental newsletter produced for several years by Six Continents Hotels before it was split into the InterContinental Hotels Group and a separate retail division in 2003.<sup>17</sup> Six Continents had over 3,000 hotels, including the brands Holiday Inn, Crowne Plaza, and InterContinental. A typical issue of *Our Planet* included several dozen short feature articles celebrating how individual properties were putting corporate environmental values into practice. Most articles were accompanied by photos that recognized the achievements of employees, managers, and owners. A 16-page issue published in 2001, for instance, included 25 such photos so that the communication as a whole depicted the large group of colleagues with whom the audience was asked to join. By publicizing the efforts of hotel owners and management companies, as well as line employees and managers, *Our Planet* expanded the symbolic crowd of fans who cheered the company's environmental efforts.

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<sup>16</sup> "Success Stories," Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Green Lodging Program, viewed August 14, 2008, [http://www.dep.state.fl.us/greenlodging/success\\_stories.htm](http://www.dep.state.fl.us/greenlodging/success_stories.htm).

<sup>17</sup> Six Continents Hotels, *Our Planet*.

## Green Communication Strategy, Step 3

### Choose the timing and channel for your environmental story:

- Select multiple media,
- Select several communication channels, and
- Select appropriate timing.

The cheerleader-fan focus pattern works best when your purpose is to celebrate successes of environmental programs to motivate others. It's particularly effective if you have rich details that enable you to tell a story about your organization's accomplishments.

#### **THE HOST-TO-GUEST FOCUS PATTERN**

The host-guest focus pattern amplifies the hierarchy of the salesperson-customer pattern, by elevating the audience even further. The narrator overtly subordinates his or her needs and desires to those of individual audience members. In an approach that is ideal for the service story, the tone is often formal, and the narrator as host conveys honor, consideration, courtesy, and respect.

The service story in Wyndham's EarthSmart program exemplifies this focus pattern. As we said above, EarthSmart communications talk about environmental conservation programs in terms of honoring the guests' preferences. Though the host-guest pattern is most often used to tell a service story, it can work with other types of stories as well. For instance, speaking to shareholders, a corporate officer can tell a financial story about sustainability initiatives in language that expresses the tone of a host who is welcoming guests and striving to meet their needs and address their concerns.

The host-guest focus pattern is best used either when the audience expects you to subordinate your concerns or when doing so will appeal to the audience's sense of importance. If the tone is insincere, however, this focus pattern can backfire.

#### **THE STATESMAN-TO-CITIZEN FOCUS PATTERN**

The statesman-citizen focus is similar to the host-guest pattern but puts a stronger emphasis on a group's collective benefit (rather than that of an individual). In this approach the narrator is like a statesman, a distinguished leader who is writing to citizens of the community and who serves them. Often the narrator is named and pictured: the chief executive officer, chairman, president, or another high-level executive. The narrator's purpose is to reassure the audience that the organization is healthy in terms of its environmental philosophy, programs, and results. The emphasis is on the organization as a whole more than the individuals within it.

Hilton Hotels' sustainability communications exemplify the statesman-citizen focus pattern. In an opening letter, the chief executive, Christopher Nassetta, asserts that responding to environmental change as a value created the opportunity for leadership and service. He broadens the concept of sustainability when he writes that the company's responses to environmental challenges will determine "the sustainability of our future lifestyles, the sustainability of our communities as we know them, and ultimately the sustainability of



our planet.”<sup>18</sup> Sustainability, for him, refers first to human lifestyles and only later to the more common focus on the natural environment. He lowers audience members’ expectations of short-term results, writing that “Our true success in building a sustainable business will be judged by future generations, not in quarterly reviews.”<sup>19</sup> This passage alludes to the initial start-up costs of environmental initiatives, which can be quite high, and thus helps establish his frankness and thoughtfulness. He promises that the company will be “prudent and deliberate”<sup>20</sup> as it transforms itself through implementation of environmental values. In the environmental mission, commitment, and policy statements that follow the CEO’s letter, the theme of service and leadership opportunities continues, and the story stresses that every team member has an important role to play in implementing the environmental mission and strategy. In short, the narrator presents himself as a reliable, forward-looking leader who serves those within his organization as well as the larger community, industry, and society.

By choosing an appropriate focus pattern for a green story, organizations can signal different reasons to accept, believe, and act on environmental values. Each focus pattern builds a different relationship between the narrator and audience and, by extension, between the organization and its constituencies.

### Step 3: Decide When and Where to Tell the Green Story

After you have decided what story to use and who will tell it to whom, then you are ready for the third step: choosing where and when to tell your green story.

The question of “where” refers to your choice of communication media and channels. You can tell your story through any combination of written, oral, or visual media, each of which offers many specific communication delivery options. The question of “when” refers to your choice of how many times to tell your green story and at what intervals. In most situations you will need to tell your story more than once to accomplish your goal. In the following discussion, we further explain these implementation options and offer four principles to help you complete your communication strategy plan.

#### CHOOSING COMMUNICATION MEDIA

Let us return to one of the situations mentioned earlier: A hotel general manager wants to convince employees to im-

<sup>18</sup> “A Letter From Our CEO,” Hilton Worldwide, viewed August 5, 2008, [http://hiltonworldwide.hilton.com/en/ww/promotions/hf\\_sustainability/index.jhtml](http://hiltonworldwide.hilton.com/en/ww/promotions/hf_sustainability/index.jhtml). This site has been modified, but the document is still available at [http://www.hiltonsanfranciscohotel.com/pdf/Going\\_green.pdf](http://www.hiltonsanfranciscohotel.com/pdf/Going_green.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

plement water conservation practices. Suppose he decides to tell a financial story—a logical choice, because the primary impetus is to reduce costs in a socially responsible way. He believes that employees do not know why water conservation matters but will take action if they understand the problem, so he decides to use a teacher-student focus pattern to explain the financial outcomes of saving water. His media options include oral communication, such as talking to the employees at a monthly meeting; written communication, such as sending them an email; and visual communication, such as posting a chart showing the increases in water costs.

Using just one medium will be easiest and fastest but probably will not be most effective because of differences in people’s learning styles. Consequently, the general manager should use all three media options to convey the water conservation story. Timing of the messages depends on the manager’s understanding of the audience’s language and literacy skills. Written messages can be read at each audience member’s preferred time and pace, whereas oral messages (unless recorded) are communicated at a time and pace set by the speaker. Depending on whether visual messages are sent or presented in person, the audience may or may not be able to control the time and pace. In sum, the general manager should apply this principle:

**Principle 1:** Whenever possible, tell your green story through multiple media—written, oral, and visual—to appeal to audience members’ different learning styles and language abilities.

#### CHOOSING COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

Possible channels through which companies frequently tell their green stories include customer and client communications, employee communications, speeches, reports, press releases, web pages, manuals, announcements, newsletters, articles, and corporate social responsibility reports. In addition, social media channels, notably, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, are increasingly popular and continue to evolve rapidly. How can the general manager who wants to convince employees to implement water conservation practices decide among the myriad of specific channels? The next two communication principles will help him.

**Principle 2:** Reduce the effort that the audience must make to receive your green communications.

Some channels let you reach the audience without their active effort. You can arrange a meeting or send electronic or print documents without the audience’s having to request them. Other channels, however, require potential audience members to seek out your communication. For example, they may have to search for your website, request a report, log in to a social network, or make a phone call. When your

## Four Principles of Green Communication

1. Tell Your Story through Multiple Media.
2. Make It Easy for People to Receive Your Message.
3. Encourage Your Audience to Participate in the Message.
4. Tell Your Story Many Times.

audience must initiate requests to hear your green story, then the size of your audience will decline.

Although merely receiving a document or attending a meeting does not ensure that people will read or listen carefully, they cannot do so if they do not receive the communication at all. Thus, in the case of the manager's water conservation efforts, he could increase his chances of success by not depending solely on audience-initiated channels; for instance, he could speak at a scheduled employee meeting, send a written message to each individual, and post the chart in a location everyone frequents, such as a company cafeteria.

**Principle 3:** Encourage audience participation in the green story if possible.

Some channels make it possible for the audience to participate in a green story. As mentioned earlier, Marriott's environmental communications provide a way for individuals to calculate their individual carbon footprints and thus better appreciate Marriott's efforts.<sup>21</sup> As part of its green story, InterContinental Hotels Group (IHG) invites the audience to visit the Innovation Hotel, an interactive website where participants can comment and vote on environmental features; the site highlights specific changes that IHG has made because of participant feedback.<sup>22</sup> When audience members are actively involved in a green story, they are more likely to accept and act on it. So the general manager who wants to encourage water conservation would be well advised to incorporate participation opportunities into his communications.

### CHOOSING COMMUNICATION SEQUENCE AND TIMING

Once you have selected your communication channels, you need to consider timing. If you retell a story artfully over an extended time period, you increase the likelihood that your intended audience will understand, agree, remember, and take action.

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<sup>21</sup> "Employee & Guest Engagement," Marriott International, accessed August 8, 2008, [http://www.marriott.com/marriott.mi?page=green\\_engagement](http://www.marriott.com/marriott.mi?page=green_engagement); Marriott, Bill, April 20, 2008 (6:23 p.m.), "We Are All Guests," <http://www.blogs.marriott.com/marriott-on-the-move/2008/04/we-are-all-guests.html>.

<sup>22</sup> "Innovation Hotel," InterContinental Hotels Group, accessed August 20, 2008, <http://innovation.ihgplc.com/>.

## Developing your communication strategy

To create a communication strategy for your environmental and sustainability initiatives, answer these questions

<p><b><i>Story Line</i></b></p> <p>What kind of “green” story will you tell?</p>	<p>An environmental story A financial story A service story</p>
<p><b><i>Focus Pattern</i></b></p> <p>Who will tell the “green” story to whom?</p>	<p>Teacher to students Coach to players Friend to friend Salesperson to customers Cheerleader to fans Host to guests Statesman to citizens</p>
<p><b><i>Timing and Location</i></b></p> <p>When and where will you tell the “green” story?</p>	<p>Through what media Through what channels How often and in what sequence</p>

**Principle 4:** Tell the green story multiple times.

The general manager should tell and retell his water conservation story frequently to get employees to buy into the program and continue to implement it. If he uses a one-shot approach, such as making a single presentation at one employee meeting, he is unlikely to get full support and continuing action. A good communication strategy usually involves a sequence of messages over an extended time. In the case of water conservation, the manager wants employees to implement the program indefinitely, and that means he should continue to repeat the water conservation story at least every few months. Without reinforcement, employees’ enthusiasm and commitment will decline over time.

By applying these four principles—combine multiple media, limit audience-initiated channels, encourage audience participation, and retell the story—you can design a communication strategy that will effectively tell your organization’s compelling green story. Whether the time frame is short or long, and whether the budget is small or large, a sound communication strategy will help you leverage your efforts to gain support, recognition, and respect for your company’s environmental initiatives. ■

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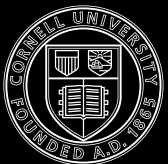
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