

FROM WORDS TO ACTIONS

Reducing the climate impact of your
PR and digital marketing activity

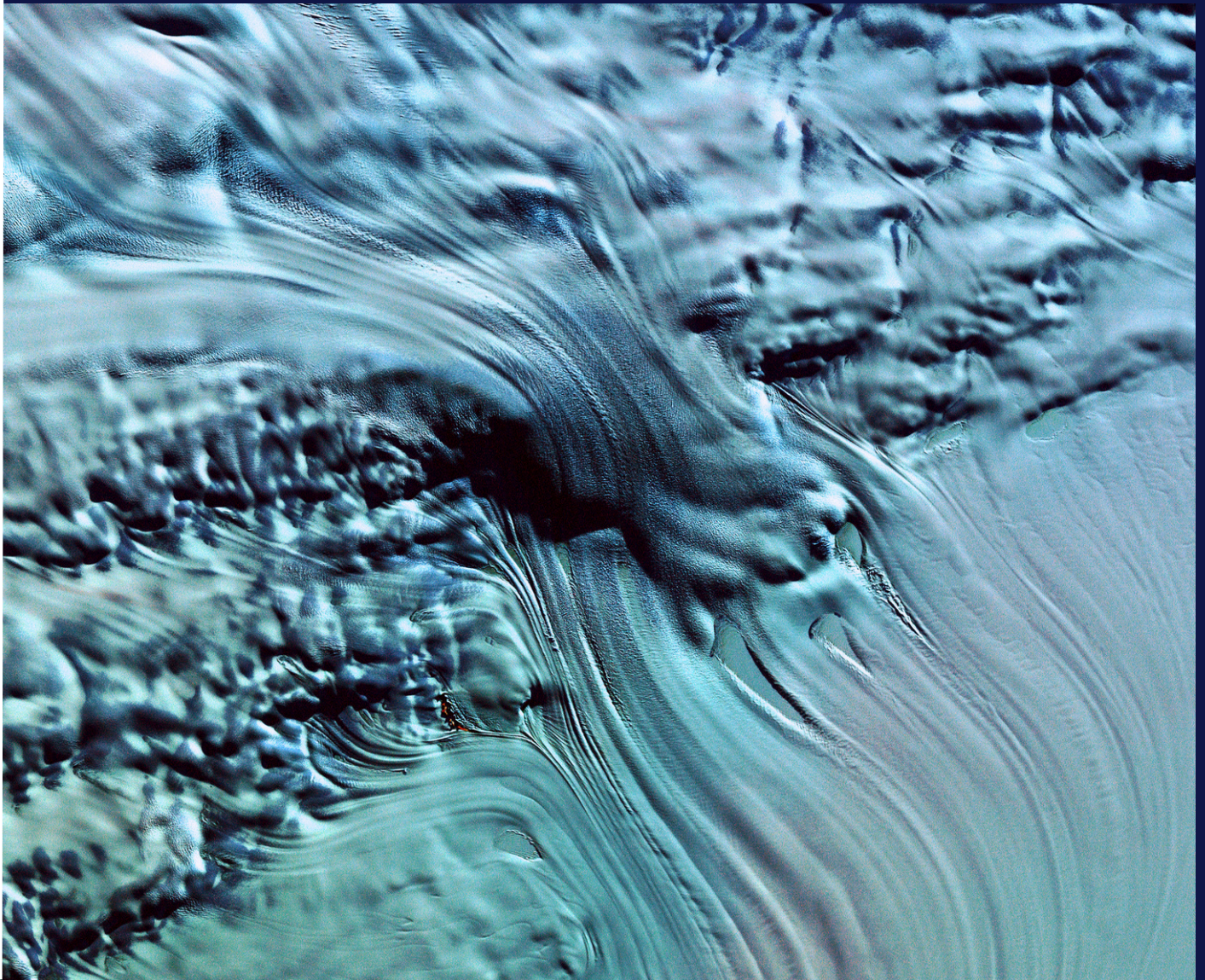


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FOREWORD

“What can I do?”

It’s a huge question, and one that’s on everyone’s mind as we face the reality of climate change. Each of us wants to make a difference, yet it’s easy to feel stuck – unsure where to start or whether we even have the right resources.

In the UK, most of us spend about a third of our lives at work. That is where we can make a real impact. It’s also where we have the power to push for change, not only within our own workplaces but across our sectors as we strive for a greener future.

This might seem more straightforward in fields that directly involve the planet’s natural resources or manufacturing. Most of our economy, however, is service-based, and these services have a significant, if less visible, impact on our greenhouse gas emissions.

Digital marketing and PR are no exception. This is why our teams at exceptional™ and Thinking Hat have joined forces to share our research and best practices from the world of Digital Marketing and PR. We’ve built these guidelines and recommendations to help reduce our sector’s carbon impact. We hope you’ll find them useful.

If this document sparks a few ideas, we hope you’ll put them into practice. Together, let’s keep finding new ways to reduce our impact, make a positive difference, and work towards a more sustainable future.



Emma Heley
Managing Director
Thinking Hat Media



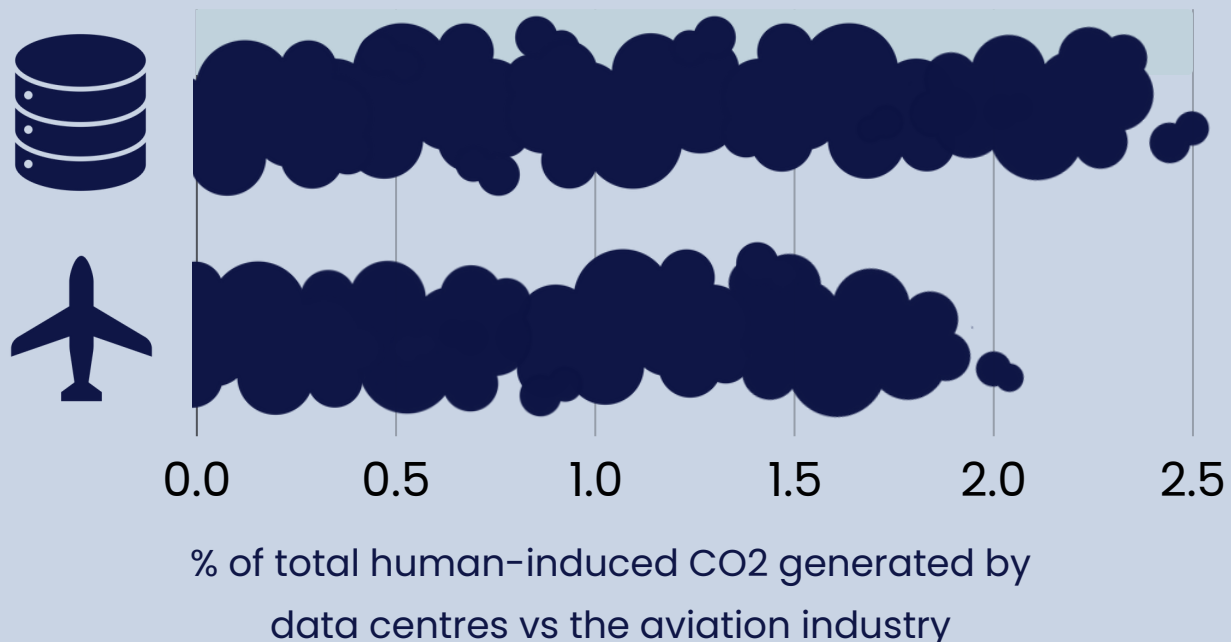
Iain Scott
CEO & Partner
exceptional™



DIGITAL CARBON

It is easy to feel powerless in the fight against climate change. Governments, multinational corporations, heavy industries and aviation are often presented as the only influences on sustainability and carbon emissions. It can feel like the rest of us are left posting about Earth Day and sorting our weekly recycling.

Unfortunately, the significant environmental impact of PR and digital marketing often goes unnoticed and unmentioned when considering sustainability. Activities such as content creation, digital PR campaigns and online engagement drives all require data centres which consume vast amounts of energy, which can contribute significantly to your organisation's digital carbon footprint.



Data centres are estimated to account for roughly 2.5% of global carbon emissions – a greater total impact than the aviation industry (2.1%). And, just like the aviation industry, the data centre market and its emissions are only projected to grow.

As the digital economy grows, so does its carbon footprint. Better use of existing digital technology, however, could help cut 15% of the UK's greenhouse gas emissions by 2030, according to [a report by The Royal Society](#).

Not only can organisations contribute to climate action by making changes in how they execute their digital PR and digital marketing strategies, but PR and marketing have a significant ongoing role to play as tools to influence public perception and behaviour.

In this paper, we will explore how organisations can actively contribute to mitigating the climate crisis by adopting more sustainable practices in their digital operations.

Understanding digital carbon emissions

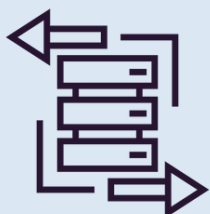
Before your organisation can begin reducing the carbon footprint of your PR and marketing activities, it is vital to first understand the main causes of those emissions.



Data centres and cloud services: These facilities require substantial energy to operate and cool servers, making them significant contributors to carbon emissions.



End-user devices: Smartphones, computers, and other digital devices consume energy and contribute to emissions throughout their lifecycle, from manufacturing to disposal.



Network transmission: The data transmission between devices and servers also consumes energy, contributing to a digital carbon footprint.

Measuring and managing your digital carbon footprint

Accurately measuring your organisation's digital carbon emissions can be a challenge due to the complexity of the digital ecosystem. However, various strategies can be employed to manage your digital footprint.



Opt for low-carbon content formats

Large file sizes increase the demand on data centres, leading to greater energy use and higher carbon emissions. This demand can be reduced by compressing the size of images and videos used in search and social advertising.

Compressing file sizes using tools like TinyPNG and HandBrake can significantly reduce file sizes without noticeably compromising quality. Using efficient formats such as WebP for images rather than PNG or JPEG, and HEVC (High-Efficiency Video Coding) for videos can also provide high-quality visuals with smaller file sizes, reducing data transfer and energy use.

Think twice before you hit send

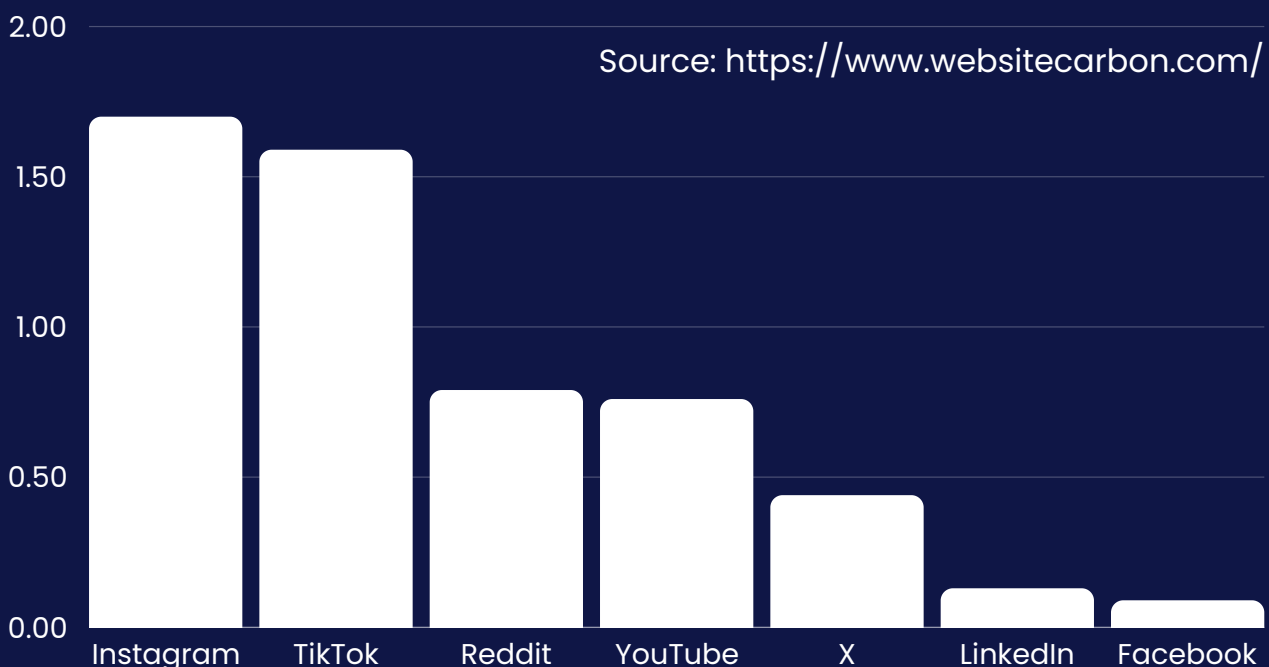
Emails are a vital part of our working day. When reducing your carbon impact, however, it is vital to make every email count. OVO Energy's ['Think Before You Thank' campaign](#) showed that if every Brit sent one less thank you email a day, we would save 16,433 tonnes of carbon a year – the same as 81,152 flights to Madrid.

Ensure any email you send adds value to your audience. It is better to send fewer emails to a targeted list than mass emails to a general audience. This not only helps to minimise your digital footprint but improves the chances of your story or messaging getting picked up by more qualified leads.

Choose sustainable platforms

Globally, the average web page produces approximately 0.8 grams CO₂ equivalent per pageview. For a website with 10,000 monthly page views, that's 102 kg CO₂e per year. This soon adds up.

Different digital platforms, however, vary in their carbon efficiency. Your organisation can choose platforms and websites with better energy practices while also optimising digital content to reduce bandwidth usage and significantly decrease emissions. Free tools like Website Carbon Calculator show how much digital pollution a website emits – the average web page produces ~0.8g per view.



Average amount of CO₂ equivalent (g) produced per user visit to social platform

"As social platforms continue to dominate how we communicate and engage with audiences, we need to rethink how we produce and consume social content with sustainability in mind. Reducing file sizes, streamlining campaigns, and targeting more effectively are simple yet powerful ways to cut down our digital footprint."

In a world increasingly shaped by social media, making sustainable choices should be at the forefront of everything we do – both for the sake of our planet and our future."

– Rebecca Holloway, Senior Social Media Strategist, exceptional™

THE ROLE OF PR

PR has the power to influence both consumers and brands. To encourage climate-friendly behaviour, it is crucial for customers to feel empowered in their choices. For brands, PR has the power to craft stories and strategies that highlight the positive impacts of sustainable initiatives.

We all bear a responsibility for shaping the narrative around climate change. By inspiring, educating, and motivating the public, we can drive meaningful action. Here are some best practices your organisation can communicate with stakeholders about climate change.



Demonstrate specific action

Pledges are no longer sufficient – stakeholders want to see specific action now. At least a fifth of the world's 2,000 largest public companies have now made some kind of “net zero” pledge to cancel out their carbon emissions.

Businesses must walk the walk on sustainability initiatives. The focus needs to be on clear decarbonisation strategies using Science Based Targets. PR's role is to be prepared to communicate specifics clearly and transparently over time.



It all comes out in the greenwash

Greenwashing is when an organisation fabricates or makes misleading claims about its environmental impact. It's no surprise that more and more brands are resorting to greenwashing, when a third (34%) of consumers stated that their trust in brands would be improved if they were recognised as an ethical/sustainable provider by an independent third party.

60%

of sustainability claims by 12 major UK brands were found to be either unsubstantiated or misleading

NGOs and investors are increasingly calling out offenders for greenwashing. Organisations need to take a realistic approach, grounded in evidence and measurable positive action, to avoid greenwashing.

Certifications like B Lab's **B Corp Certification** have gained significant momentum in recent years as a trusted badge of authenticated business sustainability – with over 2,000 certified B Corps in the UK.

Ultimately, your green achievements need to be as good as you say they are. Otherwise, you risk losing customer trust and negatively impacting your business's sustainable narrative. Actions speak louder than words.



Be transparent at every turn

According to a [2022 IPRA survey](#), climate change is a key PR topic. 81% of respondents expect climate change to become increasingly important in their work over the next two years. Almost 90% believe that the PR profession has a responsibility to tackle climate change.

Advocating for transparency is key to supporting your organisation or client. Ensure there are proof points for any claims made about your sustainability. From there, you can create credible communications to support your organisation's goals.

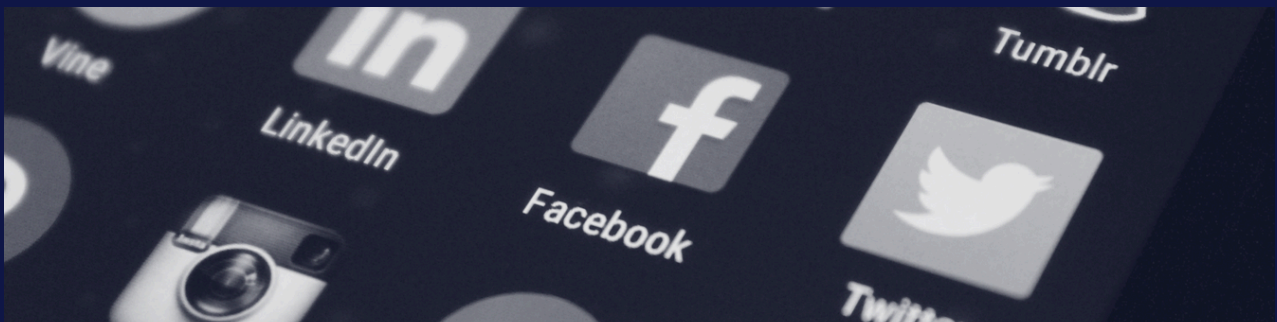
"PR is a hugely influential channel — but with that power comes responsibility. By supporting clients in communicating specific sustainability initiatives and fearlessly calling out examples of corporate greenwashing, PR teams can work in a way that is both good for business and good for the planet."

– Liv Cox, Content Strategist, Thinking Hat

REDUCING ADVERTISING EMISSIONS

Both paid search and social media advertising are dependent on data centres for their delivery. Advertisers are projected to spend \$190.5 billion on search advertising by the end of 2024, while global social media ad spend is expected to reach \$247.3 billion, all of which has an impact on the planet.

However, as with other online activity, the impact of digital advertising is often underestimated in businesses' carbon reduction plans.



As an advertiser, it is important to understand both the impact of your paid search and social media advertising and the ways you can reduce that impact, such as immediately actionable advert design tweaks that demand less data centre energy, to broader, systemic efforts.

"It's easy to imagine the digital world as totally separate from the physical one. Not only is that not true, but as the very real material impact of humanity's digital activity continues to grow, it's absolutely vital that we seek solutions with the same urgency that we're seeing in other sectors. Step one is helping people understand the scale of our digital carbon emissions – a challenge digital marketing and PR, perhaps ironically, are uniquely well-positioned to take on."

– Charlie Stewart, Content Strategist, exceptional™

Optimising ad assets and content

Reducing the weight of images, videos and display formats

As in PR, opting for low-carbon content formats and using video and image compression tools can increase the sustainability of your advertising.

Some social media platforms provide their own tools for compressing and optimising image and video files. Using these to compress and optimise images and videos according to recommended formats and sizes also maintains quality while also reducing file sizes and energy demand.

Consolidating script files, compressing fonts, and using lightweight libraries

Multiple script files and large font files increase HTTP requests and data load, which in turn increases energy use during ad delivery. **In short, inefficiently complex ads can make web pages slower and less efficient**, which uses more power. Bundling and minifying scripts with tools like Webpack and UglifyJS can reduce the number of HTTP requests made by an ad. Opting for lightweight JavaScript libraries, such as Preact, also reduces processing power requirements. All of these small changes reduce demand on data centres, and therefore reduce carbon emissions.

Optimising Content Delivery Networks

Content Delivery Networks (CDNs) are servers that deliver web content to users based on their location. Inefficient use of CDNs results in higher energy consumption due to longer data transfer distances and less optimised infrastructure. This can be mitigated by selecting CDNs known for energy efficiency and commitment to renewable energy. Ensuring CDNs are geographically distributed to deliver content from servers closer to users also reduces latency and energy consumption. [One test performed by advertising company Good-Loop](#) demonstrated that taking simple steps to optimise ads which did not impact ad performance or cost can reduce the average emissions of an ad by between 41 – 72%.

Focus on high-attention ad placements



Ads placed on low-engagement websites result in multiple impressions without achieving the desired impact, leading to wasted energy and higher emissions. Prioritising ad placements on high-engagement websites maximises attention, reducing the need for repeated impressions. Indeed, optimising ads for attention time can reduce carbon emissions by up to 63%.

Ensuring that search and social ads are being used effectively requires robust analytics and attention metrics. While this takes more time and effort, by using these to target high-engagement areas advertisers can increase the effectiveness of their ads and reduce their environmental impact at the same time.

Simplifying ad-tech stacks

Reducing intermediaries in ad-serving

In digital advertising, intermediaries refer to the various parties involved in the ad-serving process, such as ad exchanges, ad networks and demand-side platforms (DSPs). Each intermediary contributes to the data processing load – the amount of data that needs to be processed and transferred to deliver an ad.

The more intermediaries there are, the more energy consumption there is and the higher the carbon emissions. Reducing these intermediaries helps to streamline the process and reduce energy use.

Programmatic guaranteed is a method of buying digital ads directly from publishers at a fixed price, bypassing the auction process and intermediaries, simplifying the ad-buying process and lowering overall carbon emissions

Streamlining social campaign management

Third-party integrations are external services and tools that are connected to an ad campaign for additional functions, such as analytics, tracking and optimisation.

Tracking tags are snippets of code added to websites or ads to collect data on user interactions and behaviours.

When there are too many of these integrations and tags, they increase the campaign's data processing demand, leading to higher energy use.

By reducing the number of unnecessary integrations and instead relying on the ad-serving infrastructure provided by social media platforms (which are optimised for efficiency) – advertisers can significantly increase their overall efficiency and reduce energy consumption.

A single digital ad campaign delivering 1 million impressions emits the same estimated carbon footprint as a round-trip flight from Boston to London.

Measuring and managing emissions

Using environmental performance indicators: it is essential for organisations to track and manage the carbon emissions associated with their digital advertising. Implementing tools like AdGreen and Scope3 provides insights into the environmental impact of ad campaigns, with real-time measurement solutions allowing organisations to monitor the effectiveness of their emission reduction strategies and adjusting campaigns accordingly.

Using platform-specific analytics tools: many social media platforms provide detailed analytics tools which can measure both the performance and carbon impact of ads. Platforms like Facebook and Instagram, for example, offer comprehensive data that can guide adjustments to improve energy efficiency.



Filtering high-emission publishers and targeting advertising efficiently

Avoiding high-emission websites: ad placements on high-emission websites contribute significantly to overall carbon emissions. Focusing ad placements on low-carbon publishers committed to reducing their environmental impact is essential.

There are several studies published online which rank popular websites by the estimated carbon emissions per visit. Tools like the [Website Carbon Calculator](#) can also be useful. For example, the calculator estimates that only 0.13g of CO2 is produced every time someone visits LinkedIn, compared to 0.79g on Reddit.

Optimising social media audience targeting settings: serving social media ads to users unlikely to engage results in inefficient energy use. Refining targeting settings to avoid those users ensures ads reach the most relevant and engaged audience segments. Using demographic and behavioural targeting focuses on user segments with a higher likelihood of interaction, maximising ad efficiency and reducing each ad's environmental impact.

WHAT NEXT?

Reducing carbon emissions from digital marketing and PR activity requires a holistic approach.

For digital marketing, this involves optimising ad assets, targeting high-attention placements, simplifying ad-tech stacks, measuring and managing emissions and filtering high-emission publishers. For PR, strategies include maximising content, opting for low-carbon formats, choosing sustainable platforms and websites, and being strategic in targeted outreach such as email marketing and pitching to journalists.

PR and marketing also plays a crucial role in shaping public perception by promoting sustainable practices and narratives. Adoption of these practices won't just contribute to the broader global effort to combat climate change - it will help ensure that organisations are practising what they preach as they promote sustainable solutions in their day-to-day work across multiple sectors, positively impacting people's lives and our planet.

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We use a combination of social media, search marketing and content, paid media and analytics to amplify your ideas, showcase your innovations, and drive business growth. exceptional™ was born from our desire to positively impact the world through our digital campaigns. We're on a mission to cut through the noise and amplify the good in the world.

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THINKING HAT

Thinking Hat PR is a strategic communications PR and content agency for game changers and big thinkers.

Our clients range from disruptive startups and SMEs across all sectors, to social impact organisations and well known global brands. As a fully integrated agency, we wear multiple hats to ensure our campaigns are thought-provoking and cut-through.

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