

Sustainable Marketing Communication Strategies and Corporate Operational Management Reform of Export Enterprises

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Abstract

With the rise of global carbon regulation, cross-border requirements from all parts of society and shifts in the digital economy, exporting companies should no longer prioritize short-term profit and must build a long-term marketing and communication plan to promote sustainable development. Sustainable marketing communication is to open up long-term exchanges of information with foreign buyers, regulatory authorities and the local public in accordance with ESG standards for environment, society and governance. Taking Chinese manufacturing export enterprises as the subjects of this paper, it is put forward that stakeholder theory and a PDCA cycle management framework can be combined to study the connection between sustainable communication layout and the reform of enterprise operation management. Based on industry data and comparisons of traditional and green export enterprises, three ways of standardising sustainable communication that can promote operational reform have been put forward in this paper; among them, greenwashing in communication, dispersed internal management and cross-cultural information misalignment are the main obstacles, and integrated reform plans for the construction of communication systems, organisational restructuring and full-chain optimisation have been proposed. Based on the above studies, it is expected that systematic sustainable communication will motivate export enterprises to advance in supply chain greening, flat organisational structure, data-driven operation, etc., in order to strengthen the stability of long-term overseas orders and cross-border compliance. The above conclusions provide some reference for the practical management of export enterprises in carrying out operational reform in accordance with the new rules for sustainable trade.

Keywords

Sustainable Marketing Communication; Export Enterprises; Operational Management Reform; ESG; Cross-Border Trade; Stakeholder Theory; PDCA Cycle

1. Introduction

Given that the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) will be fully implemented in 2026 and ESG procurement standards are increasingly adopted

around the world, foreign importers have gradually added the sustainability performance of their raw material suppliers to the criteria for selecting key suppliers (European Commission, 2025). Traditionally, the main content of export marketing communication has been about product price and delivery time; however, problems such as environmental protection, labour rights and carbon footprint disclosure have been ignored and thus increased the risk of supplier non-cooperation with exporting enterprises. According to the 2025 Global Sustainable Trade Report by the UNCTAD, enterprises that have established an all-process sustainable communication system will be awarded as many as 45% more long-term framework contracts by foreign buyers compared to those that only provide prices; by 2027, more than three-quarters of leading European and American retail and wholesale companies will stop cooperating with suppliers who do not have necessary sustainability certificates and operating data (UNCTAD, 2025).

Sustainable marketing communication is not only about external advertising and promotion of green products but also a comprehensive system for all parties involved, which includes factory carbon disclosure, publicity of labour standards, introduction of circular supply chains and after-sales environmental service communication. Most of the previous research has examined the effects of sustainable communication marketing and single-operation optimisation measures on export enterprises separately, and few studies have been conducted that consider how alterations in communication strategy affect the whole system of corporate operational management. Many small and medium-sized export enterprises have conducted some scattered sustainability publicity, but have failed to align their internal production, human resource and supply chain management with it, resulting in inconsistent external messages and internal operations; thus, the communication credibility and market competitiveness have been significantly weakened.

Based on the stakeholder theory and the PDCA continuous improvement model, the manufacturing export enterprises in this paper will serve as the subjects; thus, it will explore the internal logic connections among the construction of sustainable marketing communication, enterprise operational reform, summarize typical practical dilemmas in the current situation, and put forward systematic reform paths in the three dimensions of communication system, organisational structure, and full-chain operation. This paper addresses the problem of linking external communication strategies with internal management reform in the field of cross-border trade and offers some practical reform ideas for export enterprises in light of the new rules for sustainable development of global trade.

2. Theoretical Basis and Core Concept Definition

2.1. Stakeholder Theory

According to the theory of stakeholders proposed by Freeman in 1984, a company's operation should be based on the needs of all its stakeholders, not just shareholders. The main groups of people involved with export enterprises are overseas buyers, foreign environmental authorities, local communities, factory front-line staff and logistics companies. Long-term Marketing Communication can be used by the company to distribute information; by normalising ESG data disclosure, they will inform buyers and regulators of their environmental and social responsibility performance, and at the same time conduct internal training on sustainable communication to foster a green and socially responsible mindset among all employees in the company[1]. The coordination of all kinds of information demands from many parties will cause alterations in the company's original production mode, staff structure, supply chain management system, etc., thereby providing an internal impetus for operational reform.

2.2. PDCA Cycle Management Framework

The PDCA cycle is a kind of circular-optimisation logic that is used to organise continuous communication and management of operations. Planning stage: In response to the demand for ESG from overseas markets, set long-term communication goals and develop supporting operating norms with specific, measurable indicators; Doing stage: One by one launch green publicity and implement plans for production, human resource reform, etc.; Checking stage: Based on the feedback of the communication and actual operating data, find information mismatches and record all deviations for later organisation and root-cause analysis; Acting stage: Adjust the contents of communication and optimise internal management links in a targeted way, and keep an effective scheme for repeated operation in the next operating cycle. A cycle operation can be employed to update the communication strategy and enterprise operation system dynamically, so as not to be fixed in a division between publicity and management in light of changes in international green trade rules.

2.3. Core Concept Definition

Sustainable Marketing Communication for Export Enterprises: Establish an extended and open cross-border information-sharing system based on ESG indicators to spread the green brand awareness through all-weather communication channels; disclose carbon footprint data, convey labour protection standards, narrate the story of a circular supply chain, and address the feedback from overseas buyers, regulatory departments, local communities, etc., instead of focusing solely on short-term prices in foreign trade promotion.

Reform of Operational Management for Export Enterprises: Due to the continuous communication of market demands, structural changes have been made systematically to the production and supply chain, organisational structure, human

resource management, data operation, cross-border compliance, etc., to address the mismatch between external sustainability publicity and internal actual operations. Greenwashing in communication: A typical way for export enterprises to deviate is to exaggerate or not provide proof of environmental advantages without related green production and management support; it will be easily fined by overseas regulators and lose the trust of buyers.

3. Transmission Mechanism of Sustainable Communication Driving Export Operational Reform

The main reason that sustainable marketing communication promoting the transformation of operational management cannot be realised is the market constraint imposed by the demand for information from all sectors. Overseas buyers and regulatory authorities assess a company's quality based on the content of its communication, so the company must modify its internal operational links in accordance with external sustainability publicity. The three kinds of progressive transmissions are as follows:

3.1. External Market Constraint Mechanism: Buyer ESG Assessment Forces Supply Chain Green Reform

Overseas large importers have built complete sustainable supplier audit systems and take the carbon emission, waste disposal and labour protection information released by enterprises on their official websites, social media and exhibition materials as the main basis for the audit[2]. Regional procurement teams will compare the published materials with the actual situation at the factory during inspections. Any discrepancy between the promotional narrative and the actual workshop will be strictly punished. If the sustainable communication content does not match the actual production situation of the factory, there will be order cancellations and supplier blacklists. In light of the market situation, export enterprises need to conduct a comprehensive reform of the operations in the supply chain to substitute high-carbon raw materials with low-carbon ones, introduce energy-saving production equipment, construct waste-recycling links, establish standard carbon statistics procedures and provide genuine data support for sustainable communication. According to the 2025 data from the World Bank, export enterprises that have regularly published their carbon disclosure communications have reduced the carbon intensity of production by an average of 28 per cent in two years. Keep communicating with foreign suppliers to help them adjust their policies according to the new green environment system, and continue to help reduce production interruptions in your green process. Those who are not successful in the audit will be barred from taking part in the high-value regional procurement market for a few years.

3.2. Internal Consistency Demand Mechanism: Communication Standardization Promotes Flat Organizational Restructuring

Uniform sustainable marketing communication norms need to be applied for all divisions of sales, production, human resources and logistics. The old hierarchical mode of management has created communication bottlenecks in interdepartmental cooperation; the sales team made false claims about the environmental advantages in foreign countries but the production department does not have a green-production process, resulting in greenwashing and loss of trust among foreign consumers. To maintain consistency among the company's internal records and the information it releases overseas, the company needs to restructure its original vertical organisation, set up a dedicated sustainable management department to coordinate the collection of all ESG data from various departments, unify communication documents, and supervise the implementation of this plan. To enhance the efficiency of interdepartmental cooperation and accelerate the spread of information, all sustainability promotion materials will be backed by actual operating data, and an internal management system aligned with the external communication plan will be constructed to maintain the long-term trust of global buyers. The special group will have weekly joint meetings to fix the data error before any promotion posts go live in other countries.

3.3. Long-term Brand Value Mechanism: Stakeholder Feedback Drives Data-based Operational Optimization

Continuous development of sustainable communication channels, such as official accounts on social media and overseas client mailboxes, has been used to collect feedback from buyers, environmental organizations, and local communities regarding doubts about carbon data, suggestions for labour standards, demands for circular products, etc. Professional operating staff will organise the collected feedback into different categories and carry out regular analysis. Every month, the analysis report will list the frequent pain points and prioritise them for improvement. The company can use various sources of feedback to modify its work plan and change various business circumstances; based on this, adjustments are made to the product recycling method according to market demand, an increase in employee compensation is planned in response to employee satisfaction survey, etc. The data feedback generated by sustainable communication has formed a closed-loop operation of "external feedback - internal reform - revised communication", and can help export enterprises create many advantages for the long-term stable operation of the company and increase the long-term loyalty of overseas brands through stable annual framework orders[3]. The built-up brand equity of the company will help it better withstand the price pressure from low-cost competitor factories in the global bidding.

4. Typical Dilemmas in Matching Sustainable Communication and Enterprise Operation

Most Chinese small and medium-sized export enterprises have made some efforts to construct a sustainable marketing system at present, but there is still a considerable distance between communication and publicity work and the actual operation of the company; therefore, three prominent practical problems have arisen.

4.1. Greenwashing Communication Widely Exists, Lacking Supporting Green Operation System

Many export enterprises have only added general environmental slogans to their product brochures and social media, but they have not implemented energy-saving production processes, standardised waste management workflows and comprehensive carbon accounting operating systems. Their green publicity is only words without strong production data to support them. Textile exporters claim in their overseas live-streaming communications that they use 100% recycled fabrics, but in reality, the production line is still based on traditional raw materials, and full raw material recycling logs, waste sorting archives or carbon consumption statistics have not been collected. If overseas buyers carry out factory field inspections or third-party carbon verification, there will be extensive order losses, permanent damage to the brand's reputation, and even inclusion in the list of unqualified suppliers in China. The root cause is that enterprises consider long-term sustainable communication to be merely a short-term marketing tool for attracting orders and do not view it as the entire long-term direction for the comprehensive operational reform of the entire supply chain, personnel and production links; therefore, the communication content is completely out of touch with the actual circumstances of on-site production and significantly increases the risk of cross-border compliance for the company.

4.2. Fragmented Internal Management Hinders Consistent Sustainable Information Output

Most export enterprises do not have their own independent sustainable management function department with full-time staff. The Sales, Production and Human Resources departments do not work together and have no unified ESG data collection, organisation or coordination system. The sales department has independently developed green promotion content and has not submitted it to the production workshop for official carbon emission verification data; the human resources department does not regularly update standardised employee welfare protection records in the shared enterprise communication database; and the logistics team has failed to inform the overseas promotion staff in charge of overseas promotion about the revised low-carbon logistics plan. The distribution of responsibilities among departments has resulted in different qualities for the

sustainability disclosures of cross-border communication platforms such as the company's official website, short-video accounts and exhibition materials; therefore, buyers are suspicious of the truthfulness of the information and increase the risk of falling foul of new and strict overseas ESG regulations and supplier audit systems.

4.3. Cross-cultural Sustainability Information Mismatch Reduces Reform Guidance Effect

Given the diverse positions in society and their various interests, the needs of the stakeholders for information about sustainable development differ. European buyers are now more concerned about the whole life cycle of carbon emission data, formalised labour union protection records and third-party environmental test reports in their communications; Southeast Asian importers have started to seek out plastic waste recycling plans and local community public welfare investment records; North American distributors need detailed chemical raw material safety disclosures and toxic substance control files. Many export enterprises use the same green communication manuscript for all overseas markets and do not make specific adjustments according to the supervision rules in different regions. The new communication norms of the internal operations reform are too standardised and cannot meet all the different audit requirements of the regional buyers. This cross-cultural miscommunication of information cannot be passed on to the market demand signal accurately; thus, the leading effect of external market feedback on the optimisation of targeted operational management is weakened and the speed of green transformation by the enterprise is also reduced[4].

5. Integrated Reform Strategies Linking Sustainable Communication and Export Operation

Based on the three main problems listed above, this paper proposes a complete system of reform to construct the construction of the communication system, optimisation of the organisational structure and full-chain operational coordination, in order to achieve the harmonious integration of external sustainable marketing communication and internal enterprise management.

5.1. Build Authentic Standardized Sustainable Communication System to Eliminate Greenwashing Risks

First, create a composite norm for the creation of ESG communication and require that all cross-border promotional materials (such as live-stream script texts, catalogues, official website articles, etc.) be backed by relevant operating data, such as carbon test reports, raw material recycling certificates, employee salary information, etc. Second, set up a third-party regular verification system: Every six months, have foreign ESG certification institutions audit the contents of the company's communication and actual operating conditions to promptly correct any

inconsistencies in the published information. Thirdly, through the gradual improvement of narrative communication and objective disclosure of current operating defects and green achievements of the company, the credibility of the information provided to foreign investors will be increased, addressing the primary reason for greenwashing and reducing future rectification costs.

5.2. Optimize Flat Cross-departmental Organizational Structure for Synchronized Information Management

Establish an independent sustainable development office within the company to lead the organisation of work, allocate a full-time team to manage cross-border sustainable communication materials, collect ESG operating data from production, human resources and logistics departments, and supervise the implementation of green management standards at all links. Break the vertical hierarchy, build a real-time shared digital data platform for all departments, have the production team upload its monthly carbon consumption data, sync labour protection records with the human resources department, update low-carbon logistics schemes in the logistics department, and have the marketing department extract standardised data to directly compile communication content. Every week, a joint meeting of all departments will be held to address information discrepancies, ensure unified operation both inside and out of the company, resolve dispersed management problems, etc.

5.3. Carry Out Market Segmented Communication Layout to Guide Targeted Operational Reform

According to the sustainable supervision standards in various parts of the world, we have set up different categories for our overseas target markets and designed many communication systems accordingly: EU customers will be informed about the entire chain of carbon data and labour rights protection, the production department will undertake carbon-reduction transformation, and in Southeast Asia, emphasis will be placed on plastic recycling and community welfare to enhance the operation loop for packaging waste treatment; for North American buyers, information on raw material safety management and the improvement of chemical raw material storage and testing procedures will be highlighted[5]. Collect buyer feedback from all departments of the company monthly to identify changes in demand for market sustainability, and then inform the relevant functional department of operations of the priority of operational reform in line with the modified communication signal.

5.4. Build PDCA Closed-loop Mechanism for Continuous Optimization of Communication and Operation

Utilise the PDCA cycle for the reform and communication matching work: Plan - According to the regional ESG audit regulations, set annual sustainable communication objectives and devise supporting plans to promote the optimisation

of production, personnel management and logistics; Do - At the same time, conduct targeted cross-border sustainable communication and corresponding operational improvement projects, uniformly collect implementation data on a digital platform; Check - Quarterly, compare communication feedback with the performance of the company's operations, identify any links where information does not match, and classify the deficiencies in the reform process; Act - Adjust the communication script and optimise the business process in a timely manner; Integrate effective matching modes into the enterprise's standardised management system and start the next round of cycle optimisation. A closed-loop system has been set up to constantly modify the communication strategy and operating system based on changes in world sustainable trade rules.

6. Conclusion

With the strengthening trend of global ESG trade supervision and the construction of overseas buyer-supplier audit systems, sustainable marketing communication has moved from promoting exports to being a necessary component in the renovation of the operating and management of export enterprises at home and abroad. The three main ways are as follows: First, the evaluation of foreign enterprises' green transition will put pressure on the supply chain; Second, united communication norms will promote horizontal restructuring within the organisation; Third, all sides of providing feedback will help achieve data-driven accuracy in the improvement of operations. At present, due to the dispersal of various departments and cross-cultural information mismatches, the link effect of greenwashing communication on operational change has been diminished.

In order to address the problem of greenwashing, the exporting enterprise should take the following systematic and integrated reform measures: First, establish a third-party verification system to ensure that the statements in its communication are accurate and reasonable; Second, set up an independent sustainable management department to work with all other departments to operate a digital platform; Third, develop multiple communication plans for different segments of the market to direct targeted green improvements in production and operations; Finally, implement the PDCA cycle to create all-weather adjustment mechanisms that integrate communication and operation. Only when there is consistency between the external sustainable publicity and the internal actual operation will the export enterprise be able to meet the rising requirements of sustainable trade access set by the world, stabilize long-term overseas framework orders, and build its own green competitive advantages in cross-border market competition.

The focus of this paper is on manufacturing export enterprises, so there are some restrictions in the range of the industry. Further research can be carried out in the service and agricultural export sectors, and questionnaire quantitative data can be employed to verify whether sustainable communication investment is correlated

with the benefits of operational reform to expand the research system of sustainable trade operation management.

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