

12 Month Sustainability Strategy Toolkit

So you want your business to be sustainable?! Wonderful news. Your first step is to build a strategy for the next year.

This won't take long; the best strategies are short, relevant and flexible.

Why focus on sustainability? Because it's good for the planet and great for business (seriously). Embracing sustainable practices is not only the right thing to do, but also positions your company as a responsible leader, enhances your brand reputation, and can lead to significant cost savings. Sustainability is not just about doing good; it's about doing well by being efficient and thoughtful about resources. This toolkit will show you how to integrate sustainability into your core business operations, making it a key part of your success story.

It is designed to be a starting point to make that first step easy.

Part One: Self Assessment:

Understanding where your business currently stands in terms of sustainability practices is the first step toward making meaningful improvements. This section helps you gauge your initial status and ensure compliance with relevant regulations (ie, let's not greenwash).

The below questions are just a starting point. Please dig deeper, these are just to get you thinking about the right things. You'll evaluate various aspects of your operations, from energy usage and waste management to employee engagement in sustainability efforts. The goal here is to create a baseline of your current practices that will guide your sustainability journey.

Not all of these questions will apply to all businesses.

- Do you know how much energy your business consumes each month?
- Are energy-saving measures already in place (e.g., LED lighting, energy-efficient appliances)? Do you turn your air con and lights off at night?
- What percentage comes from renewable sources?

- Do you calculate your organization's carbon footprint?
- What are the main sources of your greenhouse gas emissions?
- Does your business operations affect local wildlife or ecosystems?
- Do you implement any measures to protect or enhance biodiversity?
- How does your business engage with the local community?
- Do you support any local community projects?
- What initiatives are in place to ensure the well-being and fair treatment of your employees?
- How do you support work-life balance and mental health in the workplace?
- What is the diversity like within your workforce and management?
- Are there policies or programs in place to promote inclusivity?
- How do you ensure your business practices support long-term economic sustainability?
- Are your growth strategies aligned with sustainable practices?
- What sustainability-related risks does your business face?
- How are these risks managed or mitigated?
- How sustainable are your supply chain practices?
- Do you assess the sustainability credentials of your suppliers?
- Do you have a system for managing waste (recycling bins, composting facilities)?
- How much waste does your business produce on a weekly or monthly basis?
- Do you monitor water usage?
- Are there any water-saving devices or practices in use (e.g., low-flow taps, rainwater harvesting)?
- Are your employees aware of your sustainability goals?
- Do you have any initiatives that encourage employees to engage in sustainable practices?
- Do you consider environmental impact when choosing suppliers or products?
- Are any of your products made from recycled materials or capable of being recycled?

Be honest about what you can do better. To start with, simple 'yes' or 'no' will work.

For those you've said yes to, rank it with how well you think you're doing it. For the no's, rank them in order of priority with what you'd like to tackle next.

Part Two: Strategic Focus:

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You can't do it all at once. So you need to narrow down what matters to you, to your organisation and of course, your customers.

You have your ranking above, list them below in the ranking order of what you want to achieve this year (again, you don't have to do all of them.)

Bit stuck? Here are some questions to ask yourself:

- Which sustainability issues are most frequently raised by our customers and stakeholders?
- How do these sustainability initiatives align with our long-term business strategy?
- What sustainability issues are most relevant to our industry?
- Which sustainability initiatives have been successful for similar businesses in Aotearoa?
- How do these priorities support or enhance our core business objectives?
- What is the potential for these initiatives to generate positive publicity or enhance customer loyalty? *(Yes, this is a consideration for convincing your team/board oftentimes.)*
- What is the estimated cost of implementing these initiatives, and what are the expected savings or returns?
- What resources are required for each initiative, and how does this affect their feasibility? *(This is a big question, but good to briefly consider.)*

Got your list?

Great. Now let's assess them for impact. Because if the impact is going to be minimal, but the cost chunky... is it worth doing? No, of course not.

For each priority you have identified, go through these questions (again, not all will necessarily be relevant):

- What measurable benefits can we expect (e.g., reduction in energy consumption, waste reduction, improved employee wellbeing)?
- What are the potential risks or negative impacts associated with these initiatives?
- How does each initiative contribute to our compliance with our market's regulations?

- What long-term benefits can we expect from implementing these initiatives? *Consider environmental, social, and economic benefits.*
- How will these initiatives affect our relationships with key stakeholders, including suppliers, customers, and the local community?
- Are there opportunities to collaborate with other organisations or communities on these initiatives?
- What would be the consequences of delaying or not implementing these initiatives?
- How will we measure the success of each initiative? What metrics or indicators will we use?
- Are there any legal or regulatory trends that might affect the future relevance or necessity of these initiatives?
- How will these initiatives help us adapt to or mitigate the impacts of climate change?
- Can these initiatives be scaled or adapted as our business grows or as technologies evolve?
- What training or additional resources will our team need to effectively implement and maintain these initiatives?
- How transparent can we be with our stakeholders about the challenges and successes of these initiatives?

Part Three: Data Collection:

Why do we need to gather data?

To establish a baseline: Gathering data allows you to understand your current performance across various sustainability metrics, such as energy usage, water consumption, waste generation, and carbon emissions.

This will help inform your decision making and monitor progress, help with your comms and enhance your credibility. You also need it for resourcing each project sufficiently.

You want to gather what you can, without being overly arduous. And don't collect data for something you're not going to tackle yet. Prioritise. Progress not perfection remember.

Look at stuff like:

Environmental data: energy and water usage, waste generation, recycling rates, and greenhouse gas emissions.

Social data: Information on your team's engagement, community impact assessments, diversity, and inclusivity.

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Economic data: Costs and savings from prior sustainability initiatives, impacts on productivity, and sustainable procurement practices.

Have a look at what resources (in this case, team members) you have realistically available too - there is no point tackling a huge project even if it will have all the impact and cost you nothing... if you don't have anyone to do it.

Part Four: Action Plan:

Let's turn all that into a plan!

First, we need to set goals for each priority.

Starting with what you are going to tackle first and answer these questions:

- What specific steps are needed to achieve this project? Break it down into bite-sized pieces.
- Who will be responsible for implementing each step?
- What are the deadlines for each step?
- Are there interim milestones that can help track progress?
- What resources (time, budget, tools, etc.) are required for each step? You want to get specific with the budget - what are the costs, what benefits might you see. A lot of sustainability steps will save you money up front. Some will cost you. Make sure you know what costs will come about in this action plan.
- How will you handle potential obstacles or challenges that may arise during implementation?

Then you want to make someone responsible for it. This might be you, it might be another team member. Whoever it is, be mindful of other priorities.

- Who is best suited to lead each specific action?
- How will communication and coordination be handled among different teams and individuals?
- What training or resources are needed for each person or team?
- How will you ensure accountability?
- What mechanisms are in place for feedback and adjustments in role assignments?

Example:

Goal: Measure our organisation's carbon emissions accurately.

Our steps: (this is an example, please don't just apply it to your company it may not fit).

1. Identify sources of emissions:

Action: Conduct an audit to identify all significant sources of emissions, including direct (e.g., fuel combustion) and indirect sources (e.g., electricity use).

Deadline: Complete within the first month.

Resources needed: Access to energy bills, fuel receipts, and production data.

Team member: Founder

2. Find an independent agency to calculate this:

Action: Research and engage an independent consultant group that specializes in calculating carbon emissions and complies with industry standards.

Choose the consultant whose approach aligns best with your sustainability goals and budget.

Deadline: Select a consultant by the end of the second month.

Resources needed: Research on available consulting groups, obtaining quotes, and assessing their compatibility with your business needs.

Team member: Founder

3. Gather data:

Action: Collect necessary data for your consultant, including energy consumption, travel records, and waste disposal practices.

Deadline: Ongoing, initial comprehensive data collection to be completed by the third month.

Resources needed: Coordination with the finance and operations departments to gather data.

Team member: Finance manager

4. Calculate emissions:

Action: Await information from consultant.

Deadline: Initial calculation due back end of fourth month.

Resources needed: Person to liaise with consultant.

Team member: Founder for liaising only.

5. Review and assess:

Action: Review the initial emissions data for accuracy, look at where emissions can be minimised and establish a schedule for regular future assessments.

Deadline: Review completed by the fifth month.

Team member: Entire team.

Note this is an example of measuring, not continuing onwards to the next step (minimisation) or the final, last step (offsetting what you cannot minimise).

Part Five: Embrace progress, not perfection:

This is so important it gets its own section.

That seems like a lot of work so far written down like that, right?

Well, it's really not, and after you do it once, you probably won't even need to be so specific. If you want to be, great. It certainly helps with communication through your team.

Did everything in part four go right? Probably not. That is perfectly normal.

So let's reflect and do better next time.

- What were our most significant challenges in implementing the planned sustainability actions?
- Which goals have we struggled to meet fully? What were the obstacles?
- How can we adjust our expectations or methods to be more realistic?
- What successes can we celebrate, even if they are small?
- How can we foster a team culture that values effort and incremental success as much as achieving specific goals?

Part Six: Reporting

You've done some great work. Let's talk about it!

There are two main groups you want to speak to; your customers and your other stakeholders, like the board, your suppliers, advisors etc. You may do one sustainability report and release to all, or you may wish to present information differently to each group. It's up to you.

What you don't want to do though, is greenwash.

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Here are some pointers.

1. Accuracy and honesty

Be honest: Always provide an honest assessment of your products, services, and practices. Avoid making environmental claims that are vague, broad, or unverifiable. **Use precise language:** Be specific about what sustainability benefits are offered. **Avoid using terms like "green" or "eco-friendly" without clear, substantiated context.**

2. Transparency

Disclose trade-offs: Acknowledge any trade-offs that exist in your sustainability initiatives. For example, a product might use recycled materials but require extensive water usage to produce. This is okay, again, progress, not perfection. But now you know that, you can work on doing better. If the NET change is positive, then it's still a good thing.

Share failures and challenges: Being open about where your organization falls short in its sustainability goals can actually build trust with stakeholders. This is a huge one for customers.

3. Third-party verification

Seek certifications: Obtain certifications from recognized and respected third-party organizations (e.g., Environmental Choice New Zealand, Fairtrade).

Regular audits: Have environmental claims and initiatives audited by independent third parties to verify their accuracy.

4. Substantiation

Provide proof: Always back it up with data and clear evidence.

Keep records: Maintain detailed records of all environmental data and how sustainability figures are calculated.

5. Legal compliance

Adhere to standards: Ensure compliance with all relevant local and international environmental laws and advertising standards. This includes the Fair Trading Act in New Zealand, which guards against misleading and deceptive conduct. This is a big one people are starting to fall foul of, so keep an eye on it.

Stay informed: Keep updated with new regulations and standards related to environmental marketing and claims.

6. Maintain communication

Stakeholder engagement: Have open and honest chats with your stakeholders regarding your environmental actions. This includes customers, employees, community groups, and environmental organizations. It builds trust and hey who knows, they might be able to help.

Feedback mechanisms: Create systems for stakeholders to provide feedback on your environmental practices and claims.

7. Continuous improvement

Ongoing efforts: Show continuous improvement in your sustainability practices. No business is perfect, sustainability is a journey, and continual progress should be a core aspect of your organization's approach.

Update and report: Regularly update stakeholders on the progress and developments of your sustainability initiatives.

Part Seven: Review & Adapt:

Phew. That was a lot.

And none of it matters unless you do the last step. Review what you did, and adapt accordingly. Sustainability is a lifelong process for your business, not a one-and-done and each step you take makes you better at it.

After you achieve each project, take the time to review how it went.

- Did you achieve the goal?
- Was it harder/easier/quicker/slower than expected?
- Did it cost more or less?
- Did consumers or other stakeholders care? Or did you do it because it was the right thing to do?
- What can you do better next time?
- Think about how your confidence in your ability to tackle this stuff has increased.
- Give yourself a pat on the back for doing something so many businesses are afraid to start.

After your review of each priority, adjust the following ones accordingly. And next year, when you look to do this again, reflect those learnings in.

Now you are well on your way to making the world a better place. Well done.