

Why Associations Should Be Sustainability Leaders



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By: *Nancy Himmelfarb*

Does your association leverage its position as an industry leader to promote sustainability efforts? Here are some practical ways to get started.

Companies like Unilever, with the [Unilever Sustainable Living Plan](#), and Nike, with the [Sustainable Innovation Imperative](#), have long been seen as business leaders in sustainability. These companies demonstrate clear vision and commitment to sustainability and are experts at integrating sustainability

with their business goals and operations. But what about associations? As industry leaders, shouldn't they take a leadership role in advancing sustainability efforts?

Most companies need sustainability support, and associations are uniquely positioned to guide them and promote their efforts. According to a study published in [MIT Sloan Management Review study](#), 90 percent of businesses believe that they need to collaborate to address the sustainability challenges they currently face, and yet only 47 percent engage in sustainability-related partnerships. Associations can—and should—leverage their position to improve the sustainability performance of businesses across entire industries. Here's why associations are well suited to get the job done.

Associations understand the issues that matter most to members. By virtue of their unique role, associations possess very broad industry intelligence. Take, for example, the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, which seeks to serve as the voice of U.S. cattle producers. NCBA works by bringing together all segments of the beef industry, including ranchers, cattle feeders, packers, and processors. Together with affiliated organizations, NCBA is able to provide resources and advocacy support at the national, state, and local levels on stewardship of natural resources, animal husbandry practices, and other sustainability issues that affect the entire industry.

The Food Marketing Institute similarly addresses members' needs for sustainability tools and resources, focusing on issues that it believes are important to grocers and customers, such as reducing food waste, sourcing sustainable products, and increasing recycling rates.



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Associations are positioned to bring businesses together. As conveners, associations can bring together large groups of stakeholders, acknowledge diverse and sometimes conflicting stakeholder interests, supply technical expertise and knowledge, and facilitate agreement on industry-wide sustainability goals and voluntary performance standards.

Facilitating the development of sustainability goals and standards with extensive industry participation and buy-in is the first step to improve sustainability performance industry-wide. The Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy, which was founded by Dairy Management, Inc., to support the U.S. dairy industry, has been an excellent steward for sustainability. The Innovation Center facilitated development of the [U.S. Dairy Sustainability Commitment](#) and the [Stewardship and Sustainability Framework for U.S. Dairy](#), which are levers for promoting and supporting performance improvement across the industry.

Associations can drive change. After defining sustainability goals, associations should support performance improvement by issuing calls to action for members. Encourage members to adopt sustainability standards, facilitate pilot programs, and collaborate on research to address sustainability challenges. Associations should also recognize top performers by promoting success stories, best practices, and lessons learned with other businesses, consumers, and the public at large.

In addition, associations should talk about sustainability and what it means to the industry, communities, and the world at large. These engagements can be big or small, and might include industry forums or events, as well as "bite-size" messages or moments, to reach all potential audiences on topics that interest them.

Associations should also consider publishing a sustainability report with disclosures on industry performance, remembering that sustainability is a journey and that the public expects transparency, not perfection. Reports should be revisited periodically to benchmark goals and standards and look for ways to accelerate sustainability improvements across entire industries.

Business has always been a source of sustainability innovation. Let's see if associations can do more to catalyze and support business efforts. After all, it's all about impact.

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Nancy Himmelfarb

Nancy Himmelfarb is a sustainability consultant at NJH Sustainability Consulting in Chicago.

[Email \(mailto:nancy@himmelfarb.com\)](mailto:nancy@himmelfarb.com)

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