

PPAI[®] Glossary of Sustainability Terms

To establish a baseline understanding of sustainability and other relevant phrases for the promotional products industry, PPAI has collated a list of commonly used terms and definitions, as well as common standards and certifying agencies in this realm.

A

Adaptation

Adjustments in ecological, social, or economic systems in response to actual or expected climatic stimuli and their effects, which moderates harm or exploits beneficial opportunities.

Anthropogenic

Not-for-profit charity that runs the global disclosure system for investors, companies, cities, states, and regions to manage their environmental impacts.

B

Biodegradable

Capable of being naturally broken down by living organisms, reducing environmental impact.

Biodiversity

The variety of life in the world or in a particular habitat or ecosystem. It includes the diversity within species, between species, and of ecosystems.

Biofuel

A type of energy derived from renewable plant and animal materials, such as ethanol from corn or biodiesel from used cooking oil.

C

Carbon Dioxide Equivalent (CO₂e)

The metric used to account for the release of carbon dioxide (CO₂) and other greenhouse gases (GHGs) from both natural and human sources, expressed as the amount of CO₂ that would have the same global warming potential.

Carbon Disclosure Project (CDP)

Not-for-profit charity that runs the global disclosure system for investors, companies, cities, states, and regions to manage their environmental impacts.

Carbon Emissions

Carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions stem from the burning of fossil fuels and the manufacture of cement. CO₂ is the most common greenhouse gas in the atmosphere.

Carbon Footprint

A measure of total greenhouse gas emissions caused by an individual, event, organization, service, place, or product, expressed as carbon dioxide equivalent (CO₂e).

Carbon Neutral

Policy of not increasing carbon emissions and achieving carbon reduction through offsets.

Circular Economy

A structure where investments are made in advanced technologies related to material science, product design, recycling, and manufacturing, leading to a zero-waste “closed loop” system in which resources are not wasted.

Climate Change

Long-term alteration of temperature and typical weather patterns in a place. Climate change could refer to a particular location or the planet as a whole.

Compostable

Able to be decomposed into nutrient-rich soil by microorganisms in a composting environment, promoting sustainable waste management. There are differences in the capabilities of municipal composting facilities, as well as commercial and at home compostable products.

CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility)

A business approach that integrates social, environmental, and ethical concerns into its operations and interactions with stakeholders, aiming to contribute positively to society while balancing profit objectives.

Cradle To Grave

Describes the entire lifecycle of a product, from its design and creation (cradle) to its disposal (grave), including all stages in between such as manufacturing, distribution, use and eventual disposal (or recycling!)

D

Decarbonization

The process of reducing CO2e from energy and other sources.

E

Eco-friendly

A reference to products and processes that have beneficial effects on the environment or at least avoid causing environmental damage. Be sure to use validated data to verify any claims made as this term on its own can be too vague.

Energy Efficiency

The goal to reduce the amount of energy required to provide products and services. Energy-efficient homes, buildings, and products help conserve energy and reduce emissions.

Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG)

The three key factors when measuring the sustainability and ethical impact of an investment in a business or company; also called sustainable investing, responsible investing, and impact investing.

F

Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)

An international non-profit organization that promotes responsible management of the world's forests via timber certification.

G

Global Reporting Initiative (GRI)

Independent, international organization that helps businesses and other organizations take responsibility for their impacts by providing them with the global common language to communicate those impacts.

Greenhouse Gas (GHG) Protocol

Comprehensive global standardized frameworks to measure and manage GHG emissions from private and public sector operations, value chains, and mitigation actions.

Greenhouse Gases (GHGs)

Gases in our atmosphere that absorb energy and cause a greenhouse effect, including carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide, and fluorinated gases.

Greenwashing

Disinformation or misinformation used in marketing to present an environmentally responsible public image.

H

Habitat Conservation

A practice that seeks to conserve, protect, and restore habitat areas for wild plants and animals, especially to prevent extinction, fragmentation, or reduction in range.

I

International Sustainability Standards Board (ISSB)

A standard-setting body whose mandate is the creation and development of sustainability-related financial reporting standards to meet investors' needs.

L

Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED)

A globally recognized framework for healthy, efficient, carbon, and cost-saving "green" buildings.

Life Cycle Analysis (LCA)

Methodology for assessing environmental impacts associated with all the stages of the life cycle of a commercial product, process, or service.

M

Mitigation

Efforts to reduce or prevent the emission of greenhouse gases. It can mean using new technologies and renewable energies, making older equipment more energy efficient, or changing management practices or consumer behavior.

N

Net Zero

Making changes upstream to reduce carbon emissions to the lowest amount – and offsetting as a last resort.

O

Offsets

A reduction or removal of emissions of carbon dioxide or other greenhouse gases made in order to compensate for emissions made elsewhere.

R

Recyclable

A material or product that can be collected, processed and used again in the production of new materials or products.

Renewable

Capable of being replaced by natural ecological cycles or sound management practices. Often referring to resources or energy, this term does not always equate to a product or process being sustainable.

Renewable Energy Credits (RECs)

Tradable energy certificates in the US that represent 1 MWh of electricity generated from an eligible renewable energy resource and fed into the shared system of power.

S

Science-Based Targets

Targets aligned to meet the goals of the Paris Climate Agreement that provide a clearly defined pathway for companies to reduce GHG emissions.

Sustainability

Fulfilling the needs of current generations without compromising the needs of future generations, ensuring a balance between economic growth, environmental care, and social well-being.

Sustainability Accounting Standards Board (SASB)

Climate-related financial disclosure recommendations designed to help companies provide better information to support informed capital allocation.

Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI)

An international non-profit organization that promotes responsible management of the world's forests via timber certification.

T

Task Force on Climate-Related Financial Disclosures (TCFD)

Climate-related financial disclosure recommendations designed to help companies provide better information to support informed capital allocation.

Total Resource Use and Efficiency (TRUE)

A zero-waste certification program dedicated to measuring, improving, and recognizing zero waste performance.

U

United Nations Global Compact

A call to all companies to align strategies and operations with universal principles on human rights, labor, environment, and anti-corruption, and take action to advance societal goals.

United Nations Guiding Principles (UNGPs)

A short series of questions to which any company should have answers, both to know whether it is doing business with respect for human rights and to show others the progress it is making.

United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

A collection of 17 interlinked global goals designed to be a "shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future".

V

Voluntary Carbon Market (VCM)

A market where carbon credits are bought and sold on a voluntary basis, as opposed to mandatory compliance markets.

W

Water Footprint

The total volume of freshwater used to produce the goods and services consumed by an individual, community, or business.

Waste Management

The process of treating solid wastes and offering a variety of solutions for recycling items that don't belong to trash.

Z

Zero Waste

The conservation of all resources by means of responsible production, consumption, reuse, and recovery of products, packaging, and materials without burning and with no discharges to land, water, or air that threaten the environment or human health.

B Corp Certification

A certification for businesses that meet the highest standards of verified social and environmental performance, public transparency, and legal accountability to balance profit and purpose.

Cradle to Cradle Certified

A globally recognized measure of safer, more sustainable products made for the circular economy. Products are assessed for environmental and social performance across five critical sustainability categories.

EcoVadis

A platform that provides sustainability ratings for businesses, assessing their environmental, social and ethical performance to help improve sustainability practices and transparency in global supply chains.

Energy Star

A program run by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the U.S. Department of Energy that promotes energy efficiency. Products that meet certain criteria earn the Energy Star label.

Fair Trade Certification

A product certification system that aims to help producers in developing countries achieve better trading conditions and to promote sustainability.

GOTS (Global Organic Textile Standard)

An international certification that ensure the organic status of textiles, from harvesting of the raw materials through environmentally and socially responsible manufacturing, to labeling, providing a credible assurance to consumers.

ISO 14001

An international standard that specifies requirements for an effective environmental management system (EMS). It provides a framework that an organization can follow, rather than establishing environmental performance requirements.

ISO 50001

An international standard for energy management systems, helping organizations to improve their energy performance, increase energy efficiency, and reduce environmental impact.

OEKO-TEX

A certification system for textiles that ensure they are tested for harmful substances and produced in environmentally friendly and socially responsible conditions, providing consumers with high safety and sustainability standards.

Rainforest Alliance Certified

Certification awarded to farms, forests, and businesses that meet rigorous environmental and social standards, helping to protect biodiversity and ensure sustainable livelihoods.

Total Resource Use and Efficiency (TRUE)

A zero-waste certification program dedicated to measuring, improving, and recognizing zero waste performance.

SBTi (Science Based Targets Initiative)

An organization that helps companies set greenhouse gas emission reduction targets in line with the latest climate science to meet the goals of the Paris Agreement, aiming to limit global warming to well below 2C above pre-industrial levels and pursue efforts to limit warming to 1.5C.

SEDEX(Supplier Ethical Data Exchange)

A global membership organization that provides a platform for companies to share data on ethical and responsible business practices within their supply chain, helping to improve transparency and drive improvement in labour rights, health and safety, the environment and business ethics. Know for it's SMEDA audit, a widely used social auditing methodology that assesses a company's adherence to ethical standards.

Sustainable Apparel Coalition (SAC)

A group of over 250 global brands, retailers, and manufacturers, as well as government, non profit environmental organizations, and academic institutions, working to reduce the environmental and social impacts of apparel and footwear products.

Water Stewardship Standard (AWS)

A framework for major water users to understand their water use and impacts, and to work collaboratively and transparently for sustainable water management within a catchment context.

WRAP (Worldwide Responsible Accredited Production)

A global non-profit organization dedicated to promoting safe, lawful, humane and ethical manufacturing practices in the apparel, footwear and sewn products sectors. WRAP certifies facilities that comply with it's 12 principles, which encompass labour practices, health and safety standards, environmental management, and legal compliance.