Shelton Grp
an ERM Group company

Eco Pulse®
2022 **SPECIAL REPORT**

The Buzz on Buzzwords: Seven Years Later

Do Americans get the sustainability jargon you're using – and does it make them want what you're selling?

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Introduction

When we first decided to solely focus our work in what we called "energy and the environment" back in 2005, the green movement in American business was still young. Back then, we had clients who didn't want to be associated with the term "green," even when their products and services were good for the environment. Because green was still a fringe idea, we generally recommended that companies use caution in framing their environmental stories to avoid polarizing words or political connotations.

By 2015, when we conducted our first Buzz on Buzzwords study, green was exponentially more mainstream. It was a selling point for many major global brands. It was plastered all over product packaging. It was the star of Super Bowl ads aimed at the American heartland. And we all knew the lingo that went with environmental marketing: Green. Eco-friendly. Sustainable. To say nothing of the jargon that related to individual products, like recyclable or lowVOC. But what did Americans really think of these terms? Were they really mainstream? Did consumers understand their meaning — and more critically, did the words conjure up positive or negative feelings? Did people associate them with increased cost? Better health? Political baggage? That's what the original Buzz on Buzzwords report in 2015 was about. We took the American pulse when it comes to green buzzwords to find out which ones were powerful and which ones fell short of the mark. Which ones made consumers feel warm and fuzzy and which ones left them cold. Which ones they got and which ones they really, truly, sincerely didn't. That report became Shelton Group's most-downloaded report, and it still holds the title today.

But seven years is a long time, especially in the world of sustainability and sustainability lingo.

By this past year, 2022, we knew we had to update our findings. As we've continued to survey consumers on all kinds of sustainability-related topics in the intervening years, we've noticed that attitudes are shifting substantially, so it stands to reason that the vocabulary being used to express these attitudes will have shifted as well.

As part of our annual Eco Pulse® study, we retested the umbrella terms "green," "sustainable" and "eco-friendly," measuring respondents' instant reactions to the words on several different scales and comparing them to their reactions from seven years ago. We also retested knowledge and perceptions of eight terms we'd describe as green jargon — they tout a product's sustainability features and frequently appear on packaging, but they may mean more to the people who make the products than to the people who buy them. For these eight, we made a few adjustments to the terms themselves to keep up with the times, and we tested things a little differently in places (so you'll see there's not always an apples-to-apples comparison to 2015 when we discuss these eight). And finally, we added five brand new terms that deserve a spot on the buzzwords list.

We asked some pointed questions, and 2,000 American consumers weighed in.

They also threw us some curveballs, as our respondents always do. Read on.

Evaluating the

Big 3

Green, Sustainable & Eco-Friendly

We're all pretty familiar with these three terms by now. Gone are the days when we asked what green meant and a respondent might say, "Um, a color?" They all came into the mainstream through slightly different avenues (see the sidebar), but they've been thrown around liberally in marketing and communications for quite a while now.

Seven years on from our first exploration, we were curious to see how attitudes and beliefs about these terms have changed — or stayed the same — since 2015. We wanted to understand whether the Big Three are considered:

- Positive or negative
- Easy or difficult to understand
- Good or bad for health
- Conservative or liberal
- Expensive or inexpensive
- Trustworthy or untrustworthy
- High quality or low quality
- Meaningful or meaningless
- Indicative of a good or bad brand/company

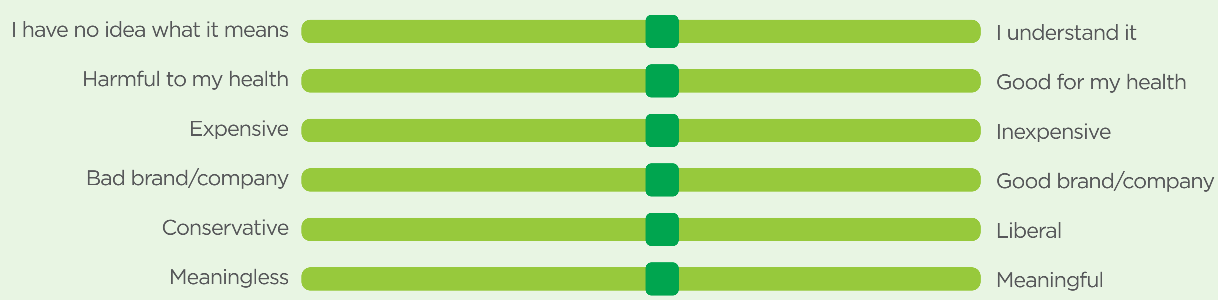
We tested consumer reaction to the word "green" itself, along with a direct synonym, "eco-friendly," and a close cousin, "sustainable." A little background:

- In 2015, "green" tended to have a political vibe, which makes sense, because it got its environmental meaning in the 1970s when it was chosen as the color of European political parties focused on ecology and social justice.
- The cheerful but vague word "eco-friendly" started popping up in the late 1980s.
- "Sustainable" is a word with deep roots in the environmental movement, particularly having to do with agriculture. But by the early 2000s it was a much-hyped business buzzword as well — so much so that it was named to Ad Age's Jargoniest Jargon list in 2010.

We offered survey respondents a series of questions that allowed them to drag a slider bar to register their instant reactions to each word on several different scales (positive/negative, I understand it/I have no idea what it means, good for my health/harmful to my health, etc.). For example:

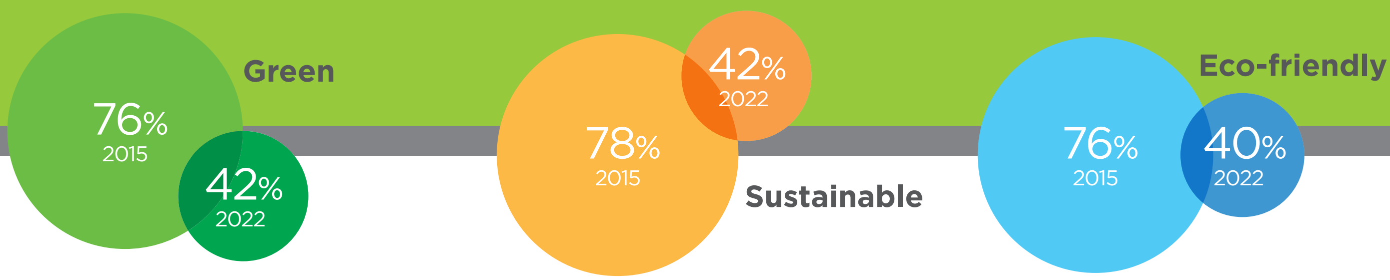
Now let's play a word association game. (There are no right or wrong answers!)

What is your reaction to the word **"green"** when used to describe a product (or a company's manufacturing practices)? Drag the bar to where you think the term **"green"** belongs on each of following scales:



The Results

There were indeed some interesting changes in how green, sustainable and eco-friendly are viewed and, perhaps most interesting of all, these changes were consistent across the three terms. ***Most notably, consumers no longer believe these terms indicate that a product or brand is expensive.***



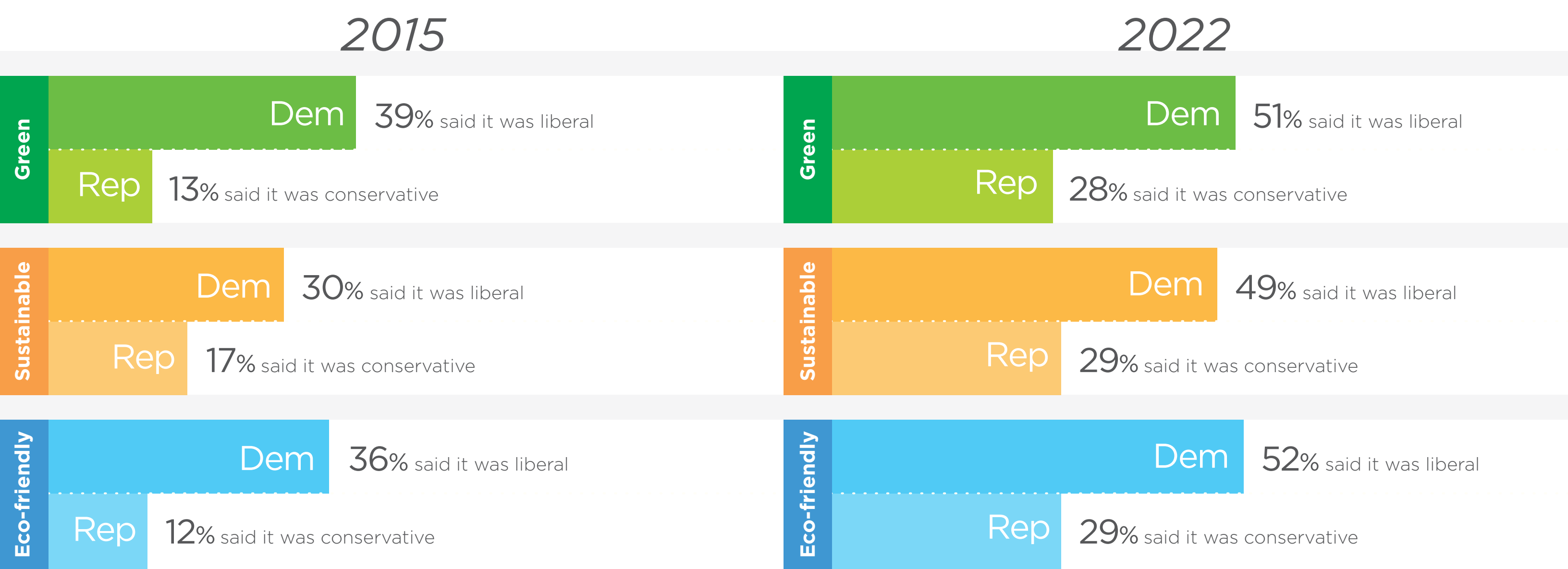
In 2015, 76% believed "green" meant a product was expensive, as opposed to 42% in 2022. The expensive score for "sustainable" went from 78% to 42%, and the one for "eco-friendly" from 76% to 40%.

Great news for marketers, right? Maybe ... We believe it could be a two-sided coin. While terms like these may no longer be scaring off consumers who believe they'll be required to pay a premium, this also means they probably won't be willing to pay more for those products just because of those terms. It could be that green, sustainable and eco-friendly are becoming table stakes for consumers.

Perhaps even more interesting are the political shifts, especially considering how polarized our country has been by politics in recent years. What we saw in 2022 was that each political faction was more willing to claim these terms than they were in 2015.

A Democrat was more likely to say a term was liberal, and a Republican was more likely to say the same term was conservative.

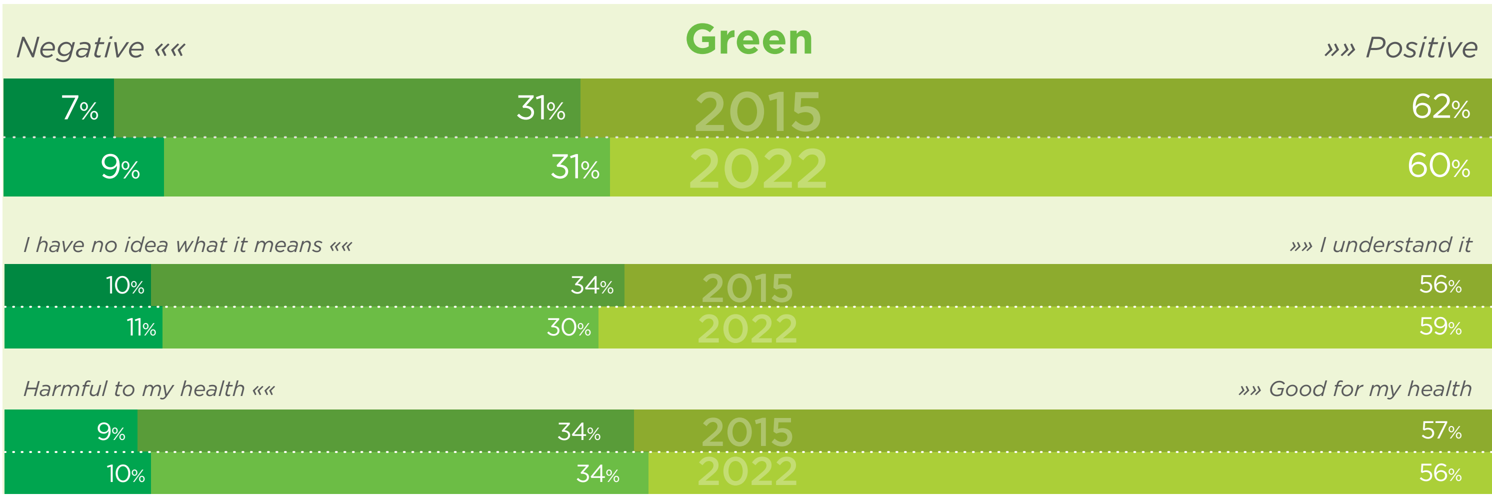
This shift means companies can use these terms more freely, without as much worry about alienating one side of the political spectrum or another.

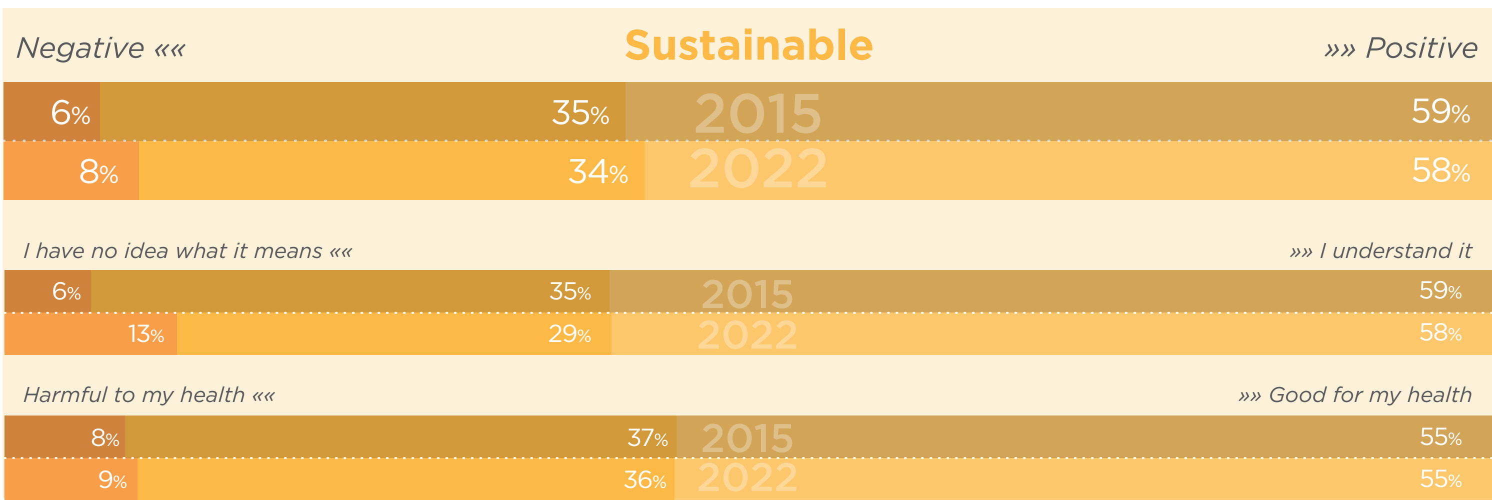


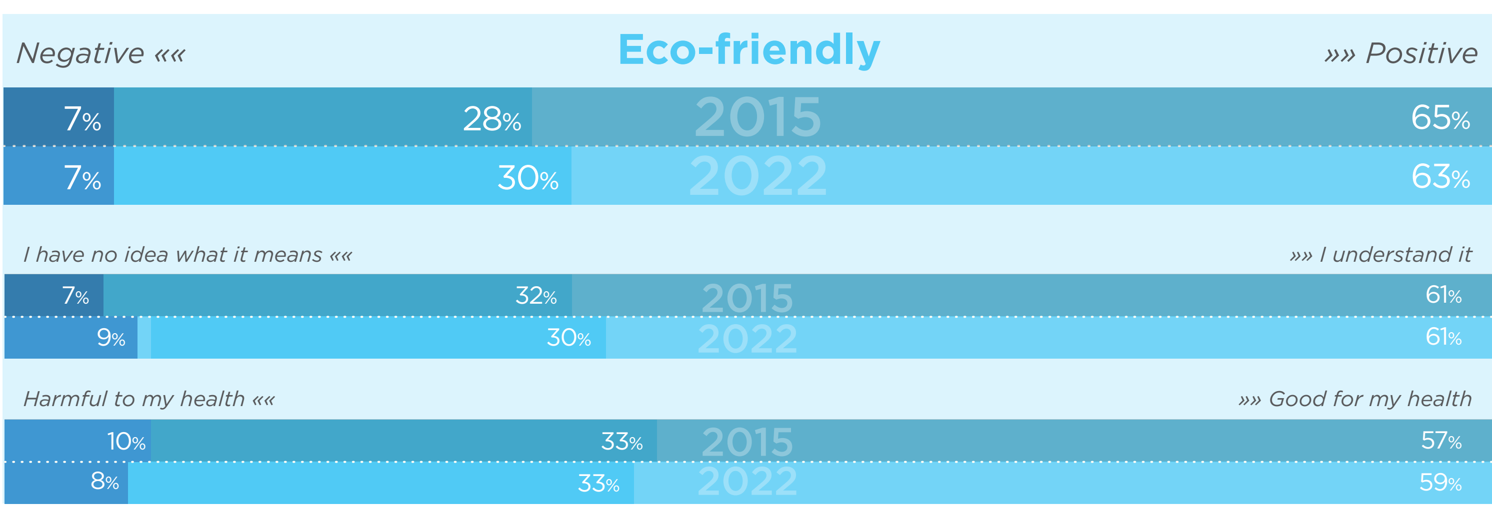
So what about everything else related to the Big Three? For the remaining measures we tested in 2015 and duplicated this year, the results held steady.

These included:

- Positive versus negative
- I understand it versus I have no idea what it means
- Good for my health versus harmful to my health







The Takeaway

There are some great opportunities for using the Big Three right now:

They're not considered expensive, and they're not nearly as politically divisive as they used to be. These three terms are viewed positively and are well understood. Overall, the Big Three still score similarly to how they scored in 2015 (aside from "expensive/inexpensive" and "liberal/conservative"), and they also score similarly to one another on all measures. Companies can use them fairly freely, with a couple of new watch-outs:

- Because they've reached the mainstream, they could start to lose impact (especially with younger audiences, as you'll see later in the report)
- The change in beliefs about whether these terms mean a product is expensive could also mean consumers no longer expect to pay more for products claiming to be sustainable, green or eco-friendly

The Jargon *of Sustainability: Then and Now*

While the story around the Big Three between 2015 and 2022 is pretty straightforward, things get complicated when we dig into the remaining jargon we tested in both years.

And that's not a surprise to us.

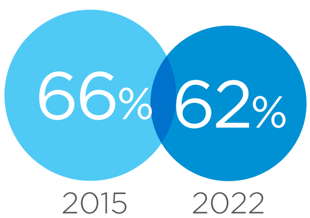
Other work we've done in the meantime has shown us that consumers are getting **more and more skeptical — and more and more concerned — about how effective sustainability tactics like recycling actually are.**

More skeptical ...
We've all been doing them for a while now, and the waste and ocean plastics problems don't seem to be improving.

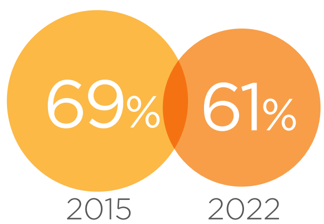
More concerned ...
To further complicate matters, consumers' reported understanding of some of these terms has decreased, while their demonstrated understanding (based on follow-up questions) has in reality increased. We believe this is because of that growing skepticism. They're thinking, "I thought I understood this term, but the more I've learned about it, the more I've started to wonder if it's really doing what it promised."

Let's dig in:

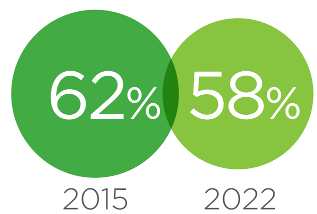
Reported "understanding" of some key terms has decreased since 2015



Renewable



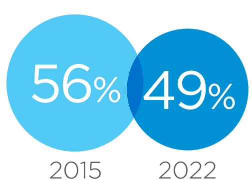
Recycled/Recycled Content



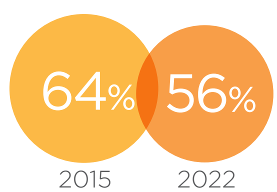
Compostable

But for these product-related terms, which are all about end of life and circularity, **they've learned more since 2015 than they realize.** And that knowledge correlates with fewer of them believing these things are good for the environment. For example:

Actual understanding has increased for:
"Renewable": They understand better that it doesn't mean the same thing as "recycled" and that it doesn't indicate something is "recyclable".

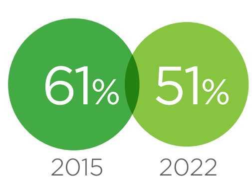


Those who believe renewable means recycled



Those who believe renewable means recyclable

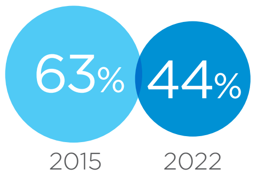
But even though they have an increased understanding of the term "renewable," they have a decreased belief that renewable products are good for the environment. We might assume that the more they understand about the term and how complex it can be, the more skeptical they become.



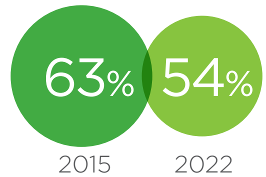
Those who believe renewable products are good for the environment

Our increased skepticism shows up in a similar way.

"Recyclable": Our belief that products labeled "recyclable" will be accepted by curbside recycling programs has decreased dramatically since 2015, therefore, so has our belief that these products are good for the environment.

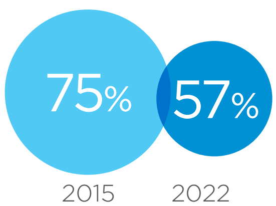


Now, fewer people believe "recyclable" products will be accepted by recycling programs

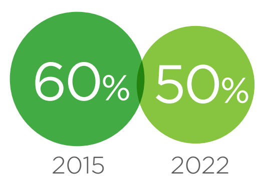


Now, fewer people think "recyclable" products are good for the environment

"Recycled Content": Likewise the decrease in our belief that recycled content means the product truly contains previously used material goes hand in hand with how much we believe it's good for the environment.



Now, fewer people believe "recycled content" products actually contain previously used material



Now, fewer people believe "recycled content" products are good for the environment

It's also interesting to note there's an age component to this skepticism (see sidebar).

Skepticism

Older cohorts (55+) have more faith in the efficacy of many of these solutions, while Gen Z and millennials are starting to hear a lot of these terms like Charlie Brown and his friends hear adults talking — just so much meaningless noise.

- Recyclable (18 – 34 are more likely than other generations to find it meaningless)
- Recycled content (18 – 24 are more likely to find it meaningless)
- Biodegradable (18 – 24 are less likely to understand it, and 18 – 34 are more likely to find it meaningless)
- Green (18 – 24 are less likely to understand it)

The watch-out here: Younger generations are paying attention and don't necessarily like what they hear. Companies can't greenwash these cohorts without being called out at the least, and eventually deselected. Be careful what you say when communicating about sustainability with these audiences.

Mind the Age Gaps:

As we saw with the growing skepticism of younger age groups, it's interesting to note how overall beliefs — and preferences for sustainability terminology — vary by age cohort.

Older consumers are significantly more likely to believe:

- Renewable and recyclable are **good for the environment**
- Most curbside programs **accept recyclable products**
- Products with **recycled content are made of previously used items** like water bottles or soda cans
- Their behaviors **contribute to their household's carbon footprint**
- A net zero house has **lower energy bills** and a **better resale value** and reduces reliance on one's utility provider
- A net zero house is **"smart" and state of the art**

Younger consumers (Gen Z) are significantly more likely to believe:

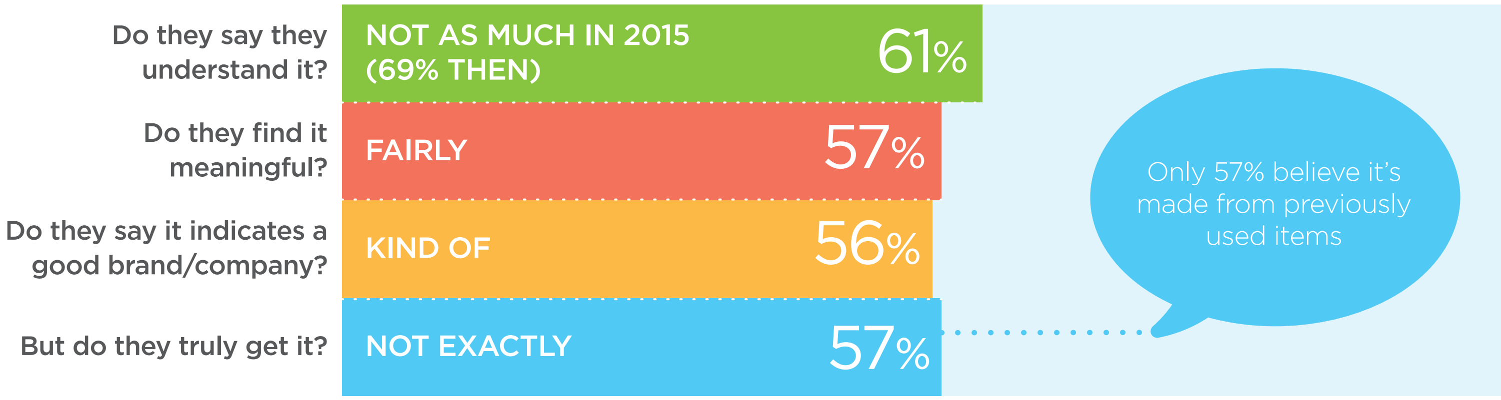
- **"Low carbon footprint"** is meaningful and indicates a good brand/company
- **"Net zero"** is understood, meaningful and indicates a good brand/company
- A net zero house is **"cozy, quiet and luxurious"**
- **"Low VOC"** is understood, meaningful and indicates a good brand/company
- Indoor Air Quality (IAQ) is **less of a concern**

Millennials seem to have the **most understanding of more sophisticated terms,** feeling **more confident than other age groups** that they understand "zero waste to landfill," "carbon neutral," "circular economy" and "environmental justice."

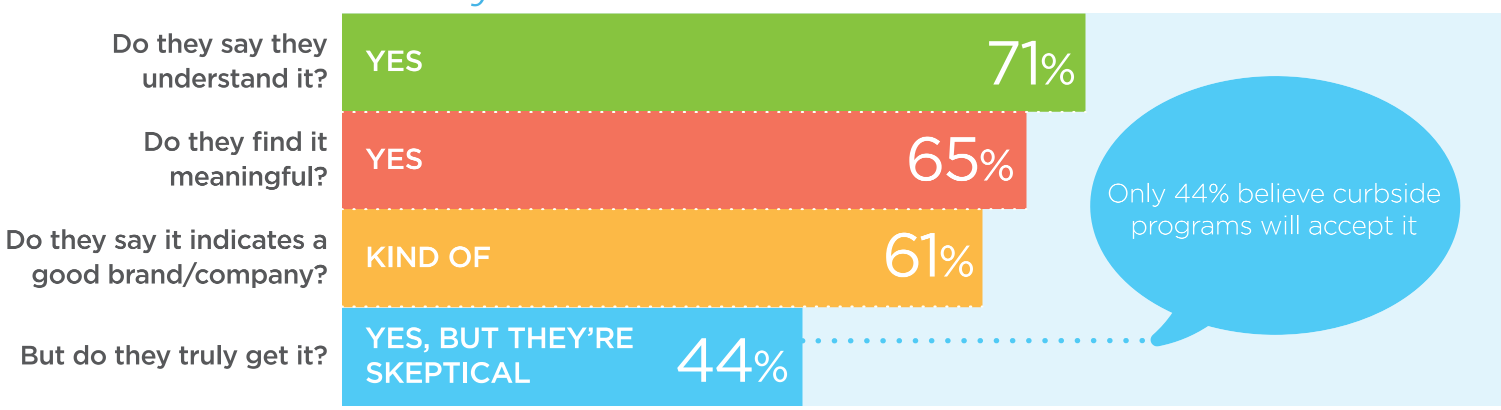
Let's look at the high-level numbers for each of these terms:

For each term, we asked if they understood it, if they found it meaningful, and if they thought it indicated a good brand/company. Additionally, for many of the terms, we asked some follow-up questions to get beneath the surface of their reported understanding. These follow-ups helped us dig in to whether they truly understood the nuances of these terms.

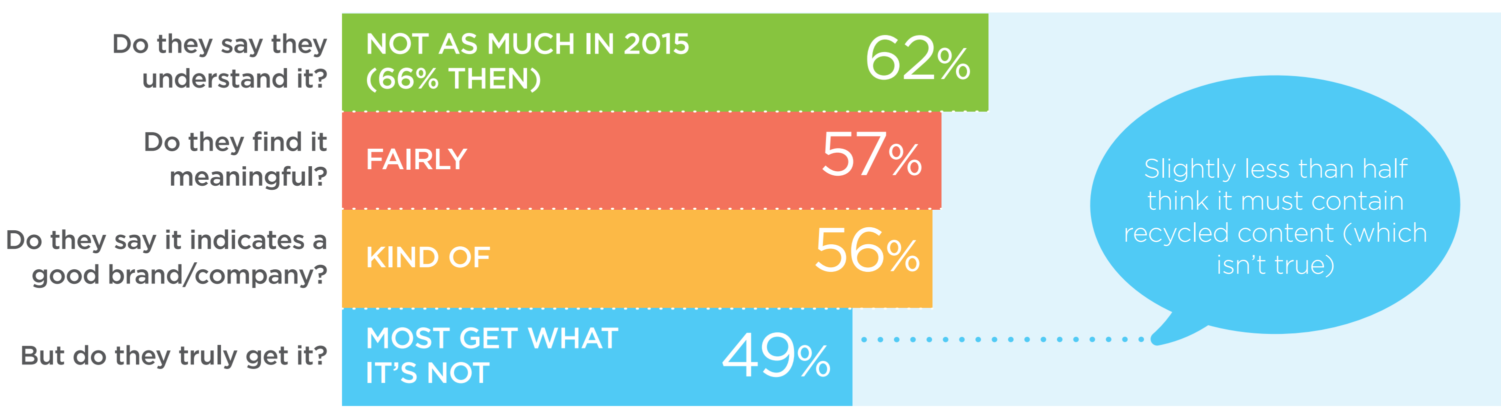
Recycled Content



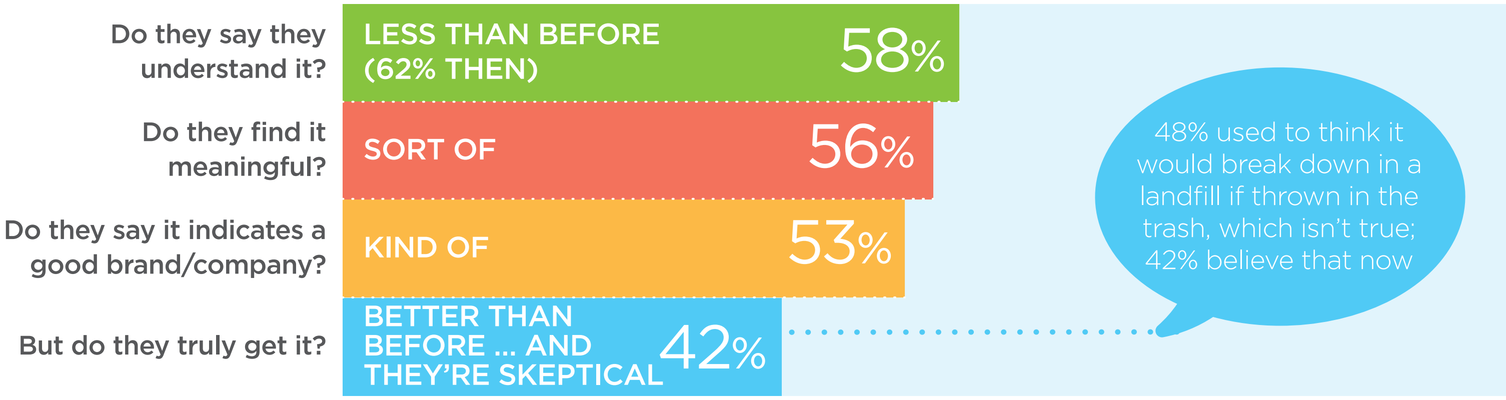
Recyclable



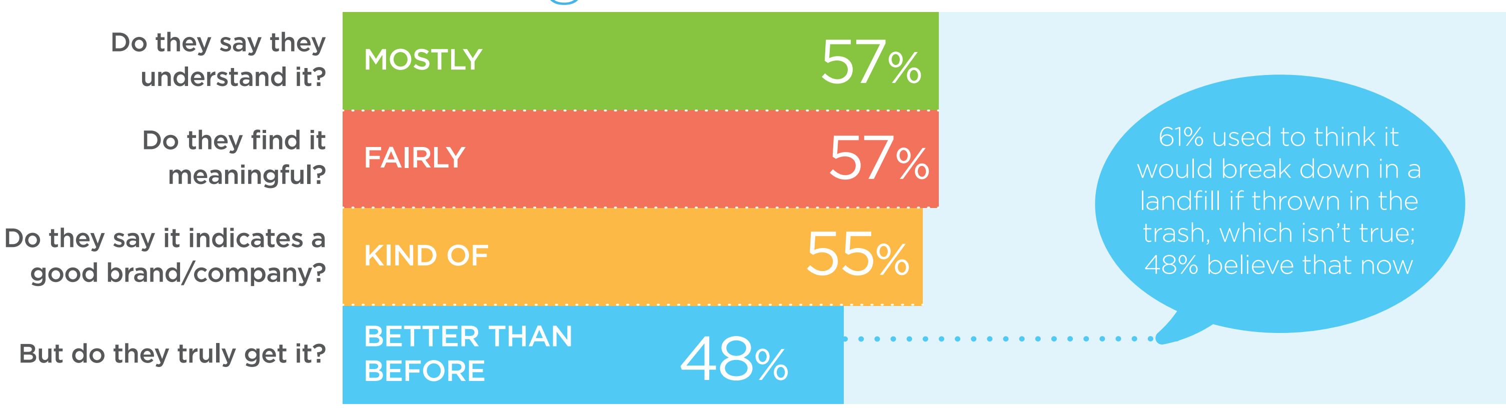
Renewable



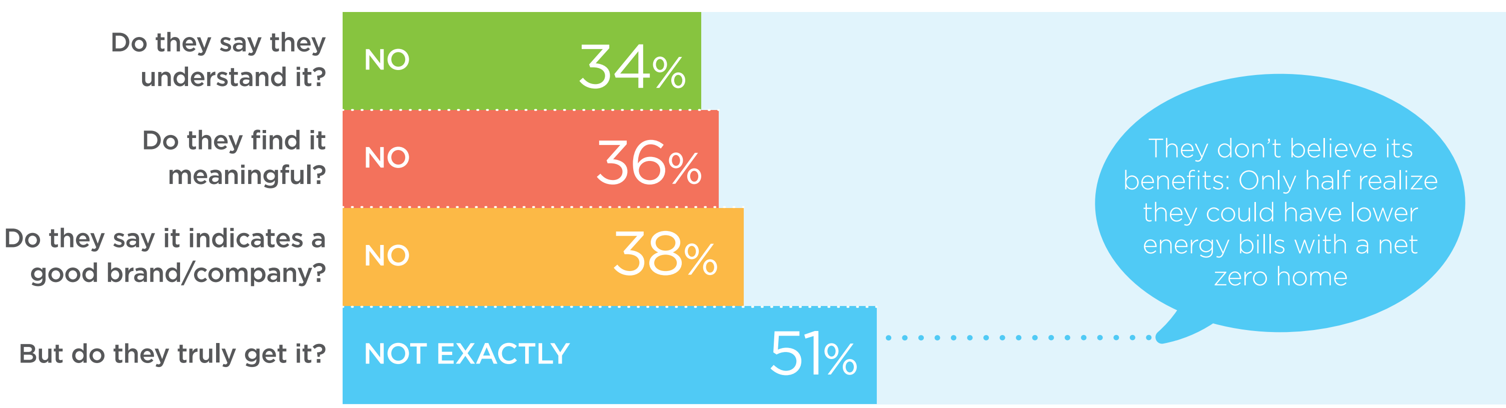
Compostable



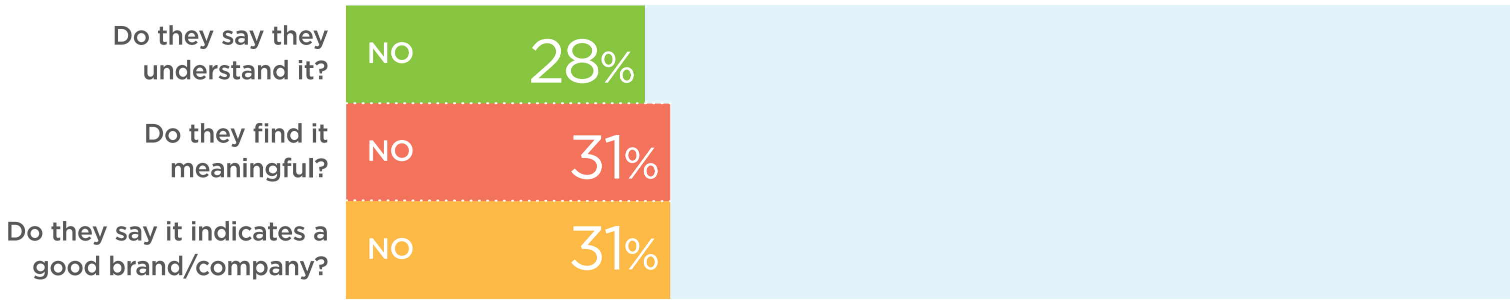
Biodegradable



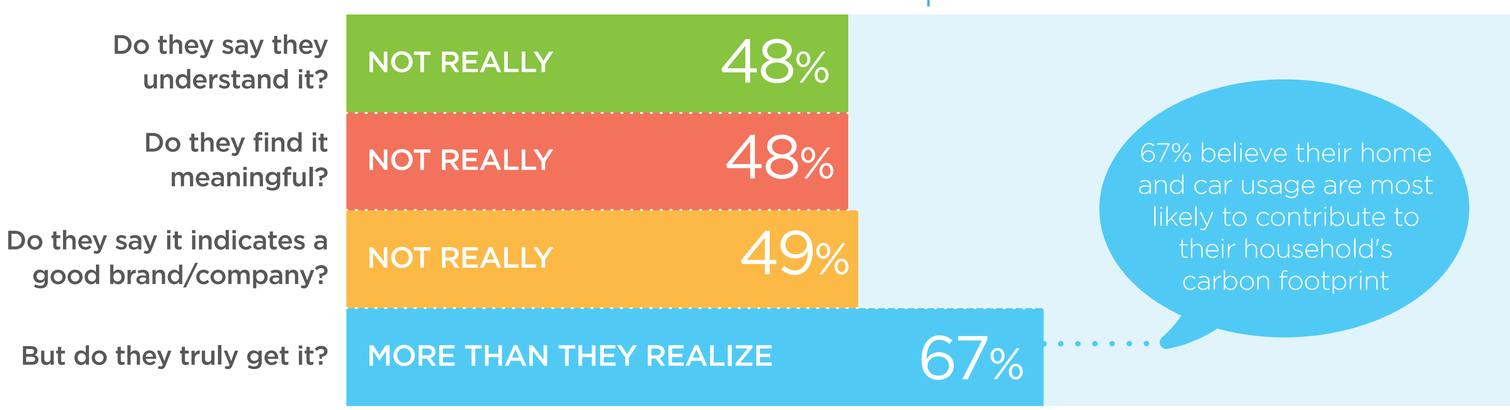
Net Zero



Low VOC



Low Carbon Footprint



Cars are the leading driver of green house gas (GHG emissions followed by electricity generation (homes + buildings).

The Takeaway

So, as you've seen, it's complicated out there:

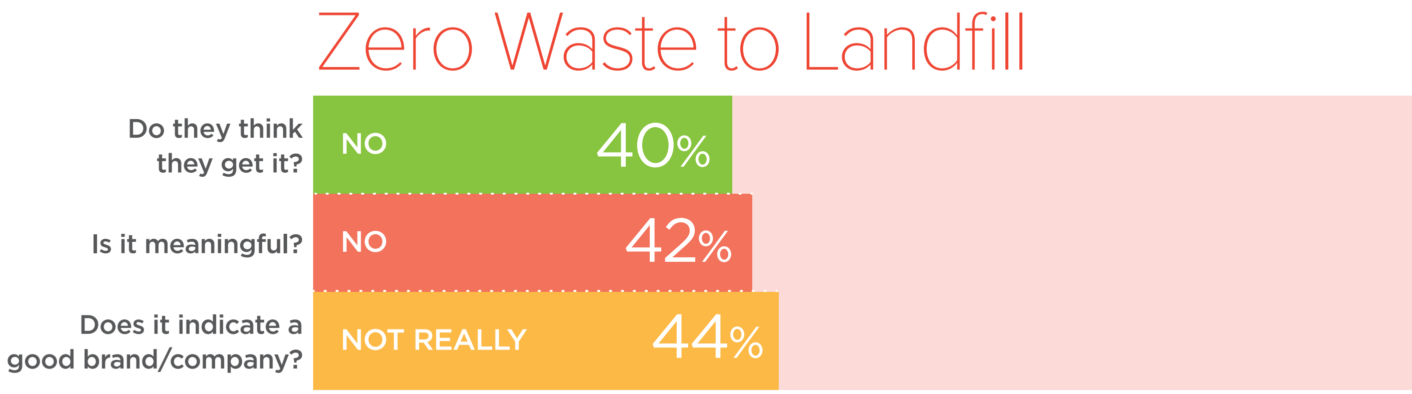
Reported understanding of common sustainability terms has decreased in many cases, yet actual understanding has grown, especially for end-of-life product issues. This increase in true understanding is due in large part to an increase in skepticism about traditional sustainability tactics (especially among younger cohorts). Consumers are more concerned about whether things like "renewable," "recycled content" and "compostable" are good for the environment, so they'll be looking for more information and more proof points when companies make these claims. There are still obstacles to be overcome in getting consumers to truly understand some of these terms ("Low VOC", "Net zero", "Low carbon footprint"), and their benefits, so be aware of this when using them.

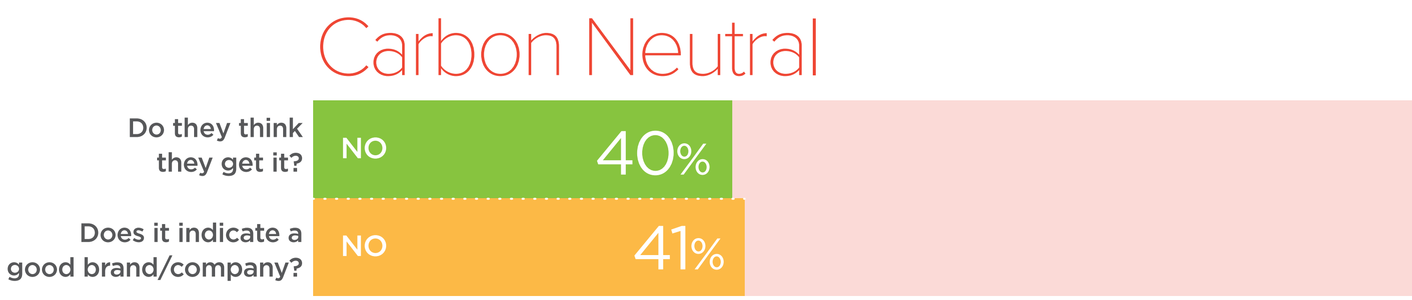
The Jargon *of Sustainability: New Players in the Game*

Zero Waste to Landfill, Carbon Neutral, Circular Economy, Environmental Justice, Social Responsibility

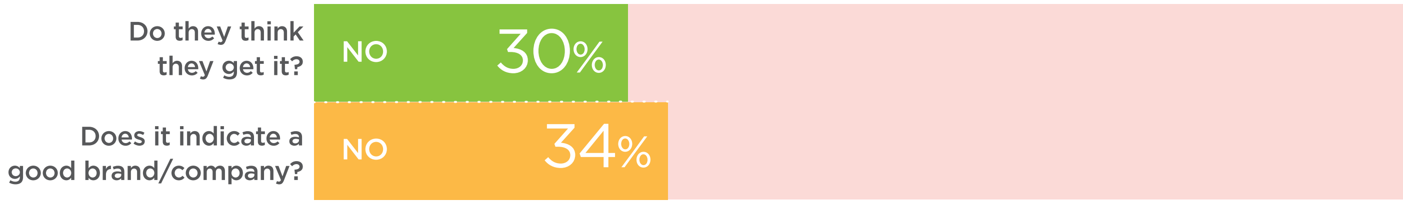
As we've all become more familiar with sustainability and ESG and the larger implications of these issues, some new words have found their way into the lexicon. As noted in the "Mind the Age Gaps" sidebar, millennials in particular feel most comfortable with many of these words, believe they are meaningful, and indicate a good company or brand. We think they're in a sweet spot based on their age and the way they get information: They've been hearing these words long enough to start really understanding them (unlike Gen Z), and they get information from a variety of media and social media (unlike older age groups who may stick to traditional news media).

But let's look at the overall results:

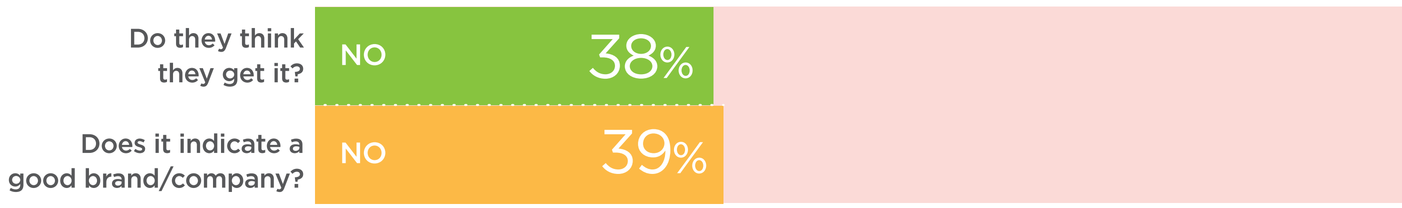




Circular Economy

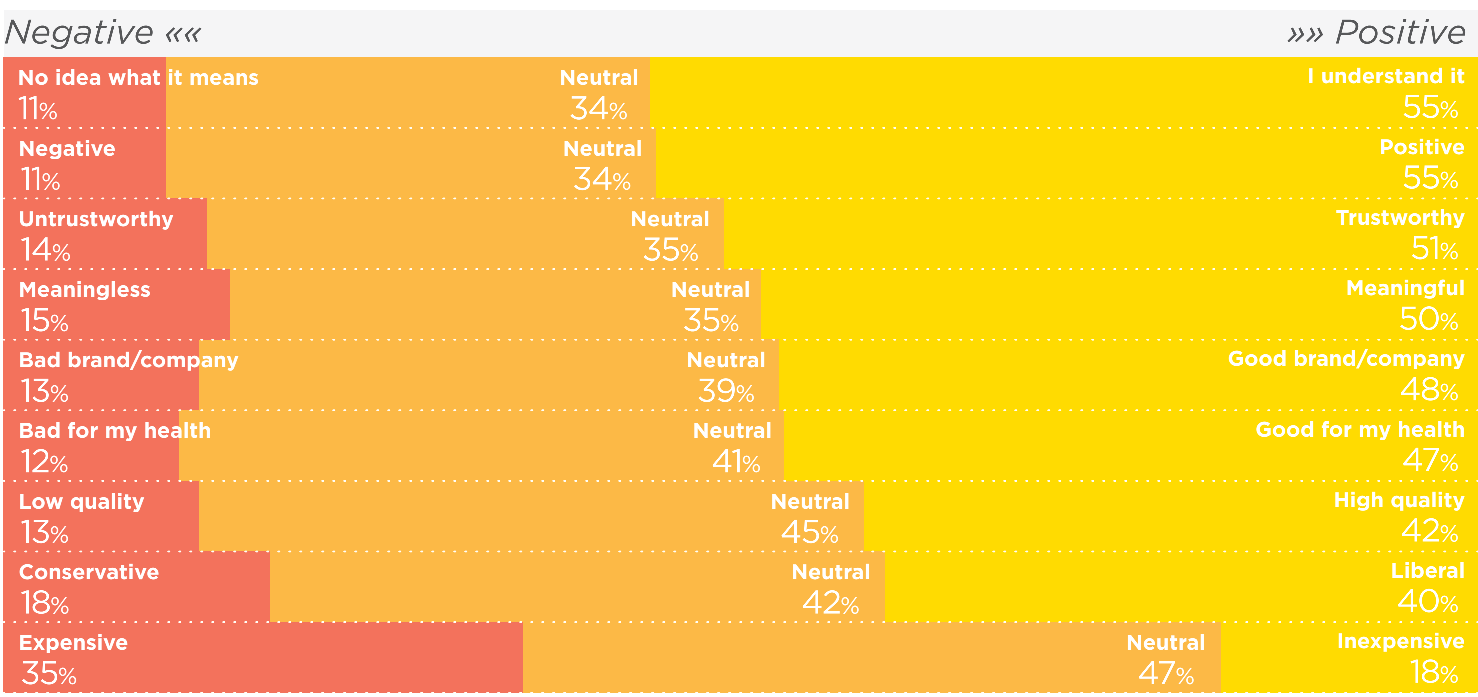


Environmental Justice



Social Responsibility

This one's a little different, because although it was new this year, we tested the full battery of associations for it. It exceeded the other new terms in positive attributes.



The Takeaway

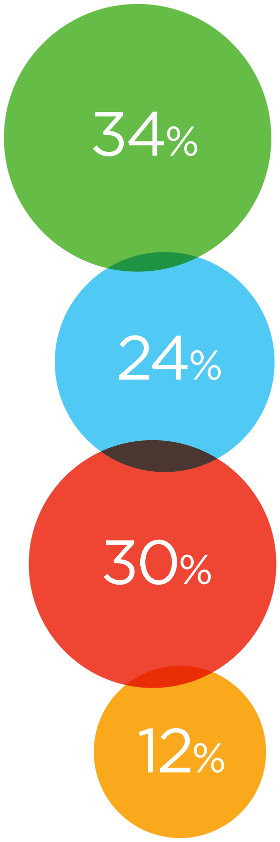
Age plays a big role in how these terms are received:

Companies talking about these issues should keep in mind the differences between millennials' thoughts on these topics and other generations' viewpoints. It's probably safe to assume that as Gen Z grows and learns more, they, too, will find these terms more impactful than terms that have been around a while (we've already seen the longer-standing terms begin to be viewed as meaningless). For consumers overall, there's a fairly low understanding of most of these terms, with less than 50% saying they understand them. The exception is "social responsibility," which scored 55% on understanding. So, know that companies using these terms will need to provide context and clarity, especially if your target consumers are older, while these ideas are still working themselves into the mainstream.

Shelton Group

Consumer Segmentation

Every year, we undertake a segmentation analysis of our Eco Pulse® survey data to identify distinct consumer segments for green products and services. Meet our four Shelton consumer groups:



Actives

Care about the environment, feel personally responsible for caring for it, and take action.

Seekers

Display green attitudes but fewer green behaviors.

Skeptics

Green is not a priority for these consumers.

Indifferents

Aren't as concerned about climate change and don't take much action personally.

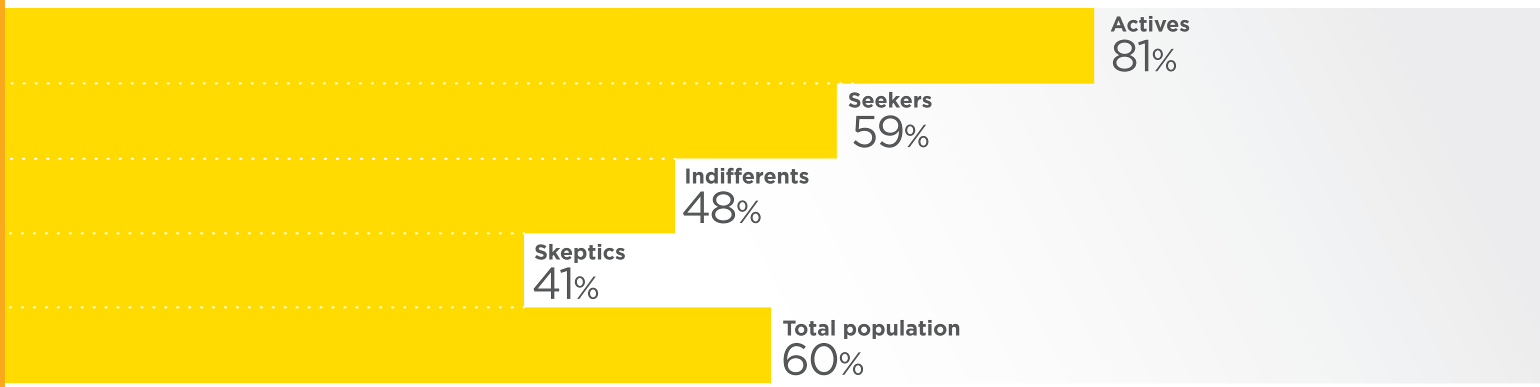
An interesting change has happened in our segments since 2015. Folks are a lot less neutral (Indifferents decreased from 22% to 12%) and a LOT more engaged (Actives increased from 19% to 34%!). This makes sustainability communications even more essential for companies, as consumers are more and more engaged. The time for hanging back is over.

Fast Facts:

- Actives and Seekers are the most **affluent** groups, with 29% and 26% making $100,000+, respectively, (compared to 22% of Skeptics and 17% of Indifferents).
- Skeptics and Indifferents were more likely than the others to report making **$25,000 or less** (30% and 25%, respectively, versus 18% of Actives and 20% of Seekers).
- Actives and Seekers are also more **educated**; 41% of Actives and 29% of Seekers have at least a college degree (versus 24% of Skeptics and 20% of Indifferents).
- Skeptics (31%) and Indifferents (33%) were the segments most likely to identify as **Republican**.
- Actives are more likely than anyone else to be **Democrats** (57% versus 33% of all other segments).
- Actives reported the highest levels of **homeownership** in our study (66%), with Seekers only slightly lower at 62%. Significantly lower overall were Skeptics (53%).

And what did our segments think about "green"?

What is your reaction to the word "green" when used to describe a product (or a company's manufacturing practices)? (Percentage rating positive)



The graph demonstrates a marked perception difference among the four segments — and the results for "green" are just the beginning. (For more detailed findings about our consumer segments and how they felt about particular buzzwords, get in touch with us to talk about performing a customized Pulse Deep Dive to answer your questions.)

The Big Takeaway

The bottom line? The results of this report show that a majority of Americans are attracted to green messaging, but they can get turned off by industry jargon. Within that majority of Americans, there are market segments that react to green messaging in unique ways.

The seeming lack of change over the last seven years when it comes to sustainability buzzwords surprised us. But is that because consumer sentiment hasn't changed, or is it because companies haven't changed what they're saying? We believe it's more the latter; companies are still using the same, tired words. When we dig beneath the surface of that seemingly stagnant data, we see a LOT of changes in beliefs about sustainability. Remember that younger generations are even more skeptical of many of the traditional sustainability concepts, and we think these changes are only going to get more pronounced. The real goal is not to get more materials recycled, that is just the means to an end. The end game, the real goal, is mitigating climate change. Many companies recognize this and have moved on from just focusing on their recycling efforts to tackling bigger climate-related actions like creating carbon neutral products and setting net zero targets. The challenge is many are not talking about these milestones, due to internal mandates to not say anything challenging. They are victims of "green hushing," with a growing number not willing to publicize their net zero targets.

To do this, companies will need to engage marketing and communications professionals who truly understand the terms they're using. Companies and marketers need to own their own roles in this green echo-chamber and recognize that consumers will always repeat back what we tell them. In the end, these terms aren't just buzzwords; these terms should be part of a complex and meaningful language that needs to be used with care to avoid greenwashing, misleading or confusing consumers. It's time for companies to lead the conversation and work to speak with audiences using this complex and meaningful language that captures the nuances with specificity and clarity.

Methodology

Shelton Group has conducted Eco Pulse® studies for 13 years as an exploration of consumer perceptions, behaviors and expectations of companies regarding sustainability and corporate responsibility. The study was conducted annually from 2008 to 2018, when Shelton Group shifted to an every-other-year schedule.

- Due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, our traditional Eco Pulse® survey was modified to include questions about the pandemic as well as many of the typical tracking questions. 2020 included two rounds of Eco Pulse®, with the first fielded in May 2020 and the second fielded in December 2020 to provide two points of tracking during this unprecedented year.
- The 2022 online survey was fielded from 7/25 to 8/9, 2022, surveying a total of 2,008 U.S. respondents.
- The survey sample was stratified to mirror the U.S. population, using quotas for geography, age, gender, education and race; data were weighted slightly to match U.S. population distributions. Margin of error is +/- 2.2%.

About

Shelton Grp
an ERM Group company

Shelton Group, an ERM Group company, creates a market advantage for organizations that are creating a sustainable future. If you're trying to drive brand preference, sales, employee attraction and retention, and improved investor outcomes, we understand your marketing communications challenges and can help you tackle them like no one else.

Learn more at sheltongrp.com

By the way ...

Custom branded content is a powerful sales tool. If you'd love to put a custom report like this in the hands of your marketing or sales staff, **contact us**.