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# Winning in the Green Comms Recession:

B2B Edition

B2B PULSE • Fall 2025 • ERM Shelton

## INTRODUCTION



Sustainability is experiencing its own economic cycle — once a niche investment, it's matured into a global growth market, weathering downturns and driving long-term value. What began as a moral margin call has become a core engine of resilience and innovation across industries. It has caught the eyes of consumers, employees, investors and businesses along nearly every sector's value chain.

83%

Of people around the world agree that global warming, or climate change, is occurring, and it is primarily caused by human activity.

Source: Global Eco Pulse® 2025 – Globally weighted by subregion  
How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Global warming, or climate change, is occurring, and it is primarily caused by human activity. (n=5,673)

We've long seen that consumers think more of companies with credible sustainability stories. Here are some of our recent stats:



of people we surveyed from around the globe say they are "very/extremely" interested in hearing from companies about their efforts to reduce their environmental impact.



of people we surveyed from around the globe say knowing a company is a leader in reducing their environmental impact improves their opinion of that company.



of people surveyed can name a product or brand they've purchased — or not purchased — because of the environmental or social record of the manufacturer.



of people we surveyed from around the globe say knowing a company is a leader in reducing their environmental impact decreases their opinion of that company.

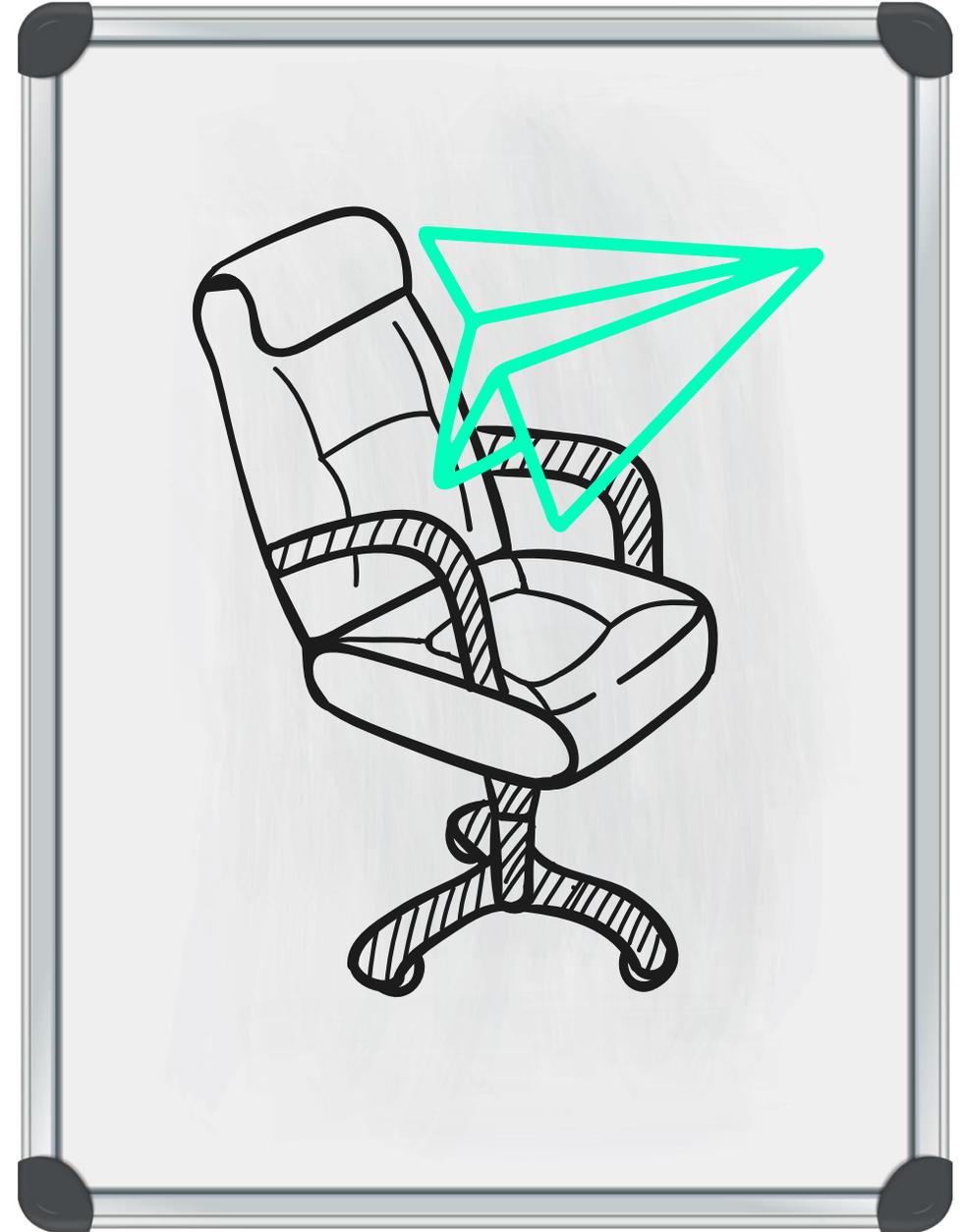
Source: Global Eco Pulse® 2025 – Globally weighted by subregion (n=5,673)

Employees want to work for companies that take sustainability seriously.



of employees say a company's environmental or social record is "somewhat to extremely" important when considering where to work.

Source: ERMShelton Global B2B Pulse 2025 - How important is a company's environmental or social record to you when considering where you would like to work? (US n=203) (Europe n=232)



And investors see sustainability as a driver of long-term value.

 70%

of studies show direct positive correlation between ESG scores and financial performance.<sup>1</sup>

 30% AUM

ESG-focused investors now represent over 30% of global AUM, projected to reach \$53 trillion by 2025.<sup>3</sup>

 2.6x

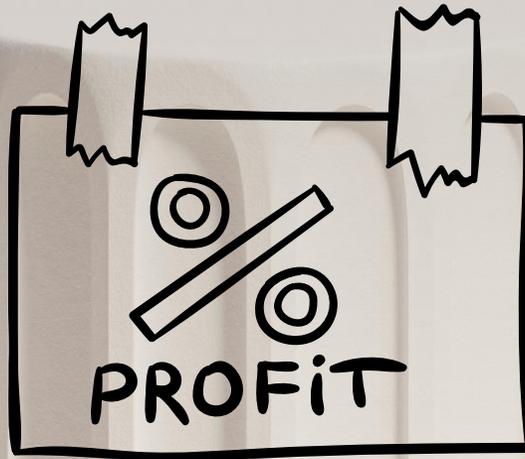
Companies that align ESG with business strategy are 2.6x more likely to report financial outperformance compared to peers.<sup>2</sup>

 1.8x

A 10-point improvement in ESG scores correlates with approximately 1.8x higher EV/EBITDA multiple.<sup>4</sup>

1. EY, *IPO-ready companies will see higher valuation and growth with robust ESG disclosure practices*, 2022
2. McKinsey & Company, *"The ESG Premium: New Perspectives on Value and Performance"*, 2020
3. Riveron, *Gearing up for an IPO?*, 2023
4. Deloitte, *Does a company's ESG score have a measurable impact on its market value?*, 2023

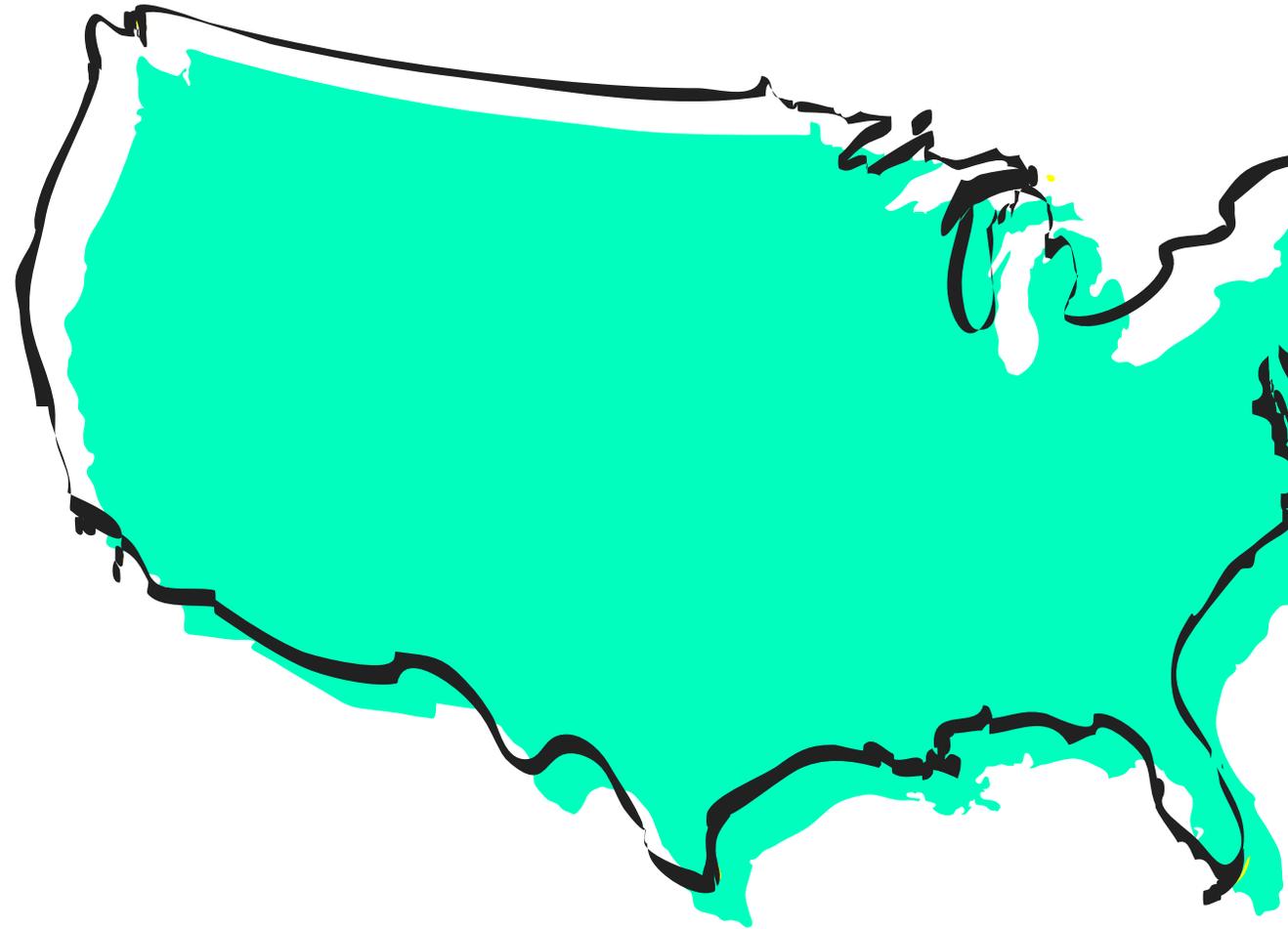
But after years of trying to communicate market value  
through sustainability,  
the *landscape* is changing in 2025 ...



# In the U.S.

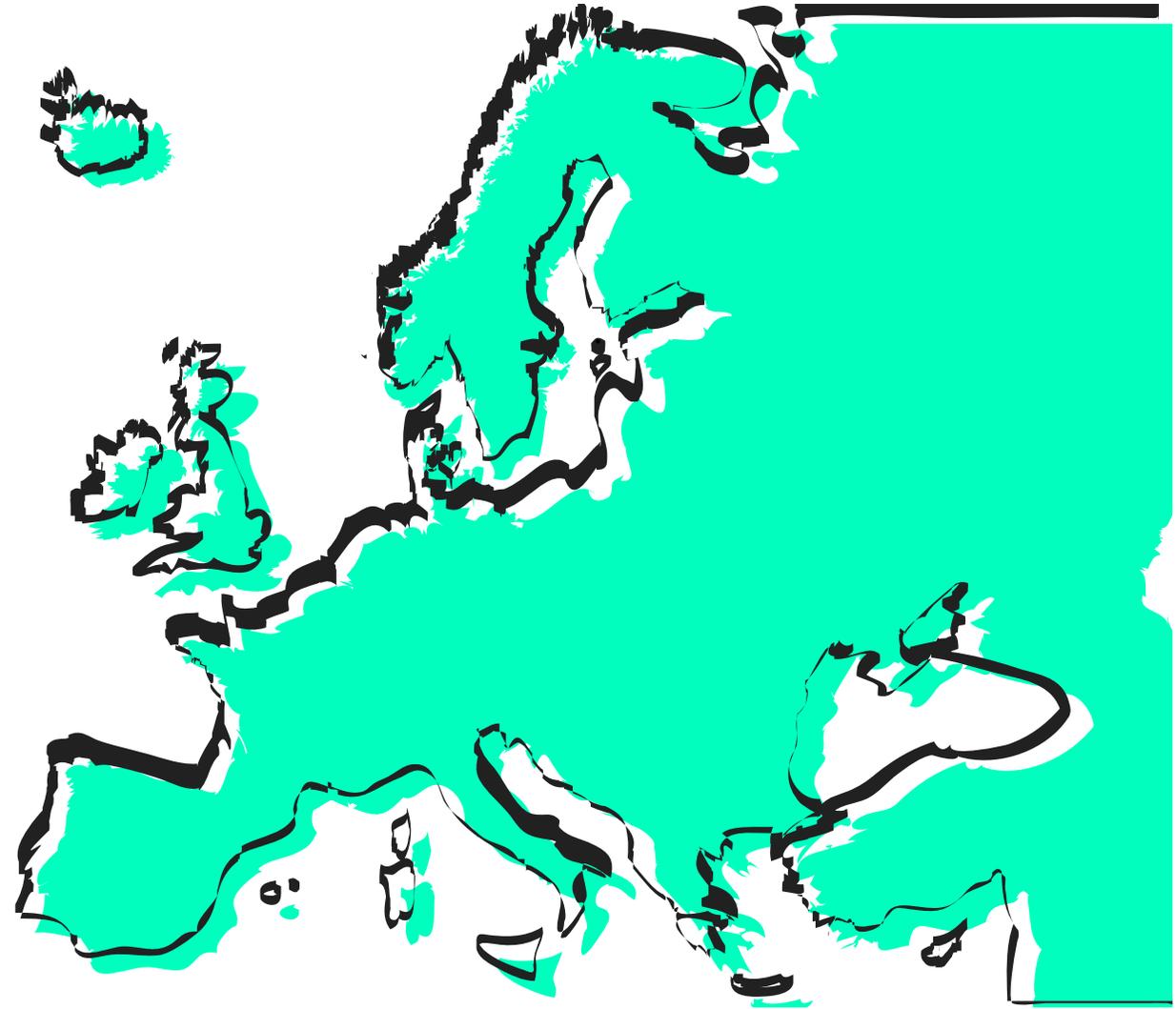
## *The current administration:*

- Withdrew from the Paris Climate Accord
- Deleted the words "climate change" from federal websites
- Rolled back IRA funding that supported energy transition projects
- Is planning to rescind the 2009 Endangerment Finding, the science-based statement that greenhouse gas emissions endanger human health



# In Europe

- Lawmakers delayed implementation of CSRD, effectively removing obligations for thousands of businesses
- European Commission has pressed pause on the Green Claims Directive
- The far-right's anti-climate narrative continues to gain traction and orchestrate backlash in European parliament
- The Net Zero Banking Alliance has paused operations following high profile departures
- Record heatwaves signal a deepening climate crisis, while energy prices reach record highs and wars threaten global energy security



And when we add in economic concerns, like tariffs,

SUNDAY

MONDAY

TUESDAY

WEDNESDAY

THURSDAY

FRIDAY

SATURDAY

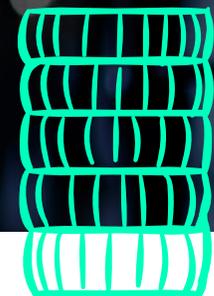
*business leaders  
are struggling to plan  
for the future.*

In the June 2025 McKinsey Global Survey of corporate executives, **60%** stated that **changing trade policy is a disruptive force in the global economy** — that's more than double from September 2024.



As this shift towards a more volatile market for sustainability communications forms, we're being asked a crucial question:

Do business buyers still care  
about *sustainability*?



In this year's B2B Pulse, we decided to find out.

BUSINESS BUYERS IN

## Europe

(232)



 UK (40)

 Spain (39)

 Germany (41)

 Finland (16)

 France (34)

 Sweden (12)

 Italy (38)

 Norway (12)

Europe buyer margin of error: +/- 6.43%

BUSINESS BUYERS IN THE

## Americas

(203)



 U.S. (203)

Americas buyer margin of error: +/- 6.88%

From July 22–30, 2025, we surveyed **435** senior decision makers with responsibility for procuring B2B services.

ACROSS FIVE KEY SECTORS:



Technology/  
software



Retailers  
(including big  
box stores)



Financial  
services



Consumer goods  
(packaging,  
manufacturing,  
brands, etc.)



Chemicals, metals or  
plastics  
manufacturing

And the answer was a decisive:

Yes

Sustainability *still* drives favorable impressions among buyers of business goods and services.

UNITED STATES

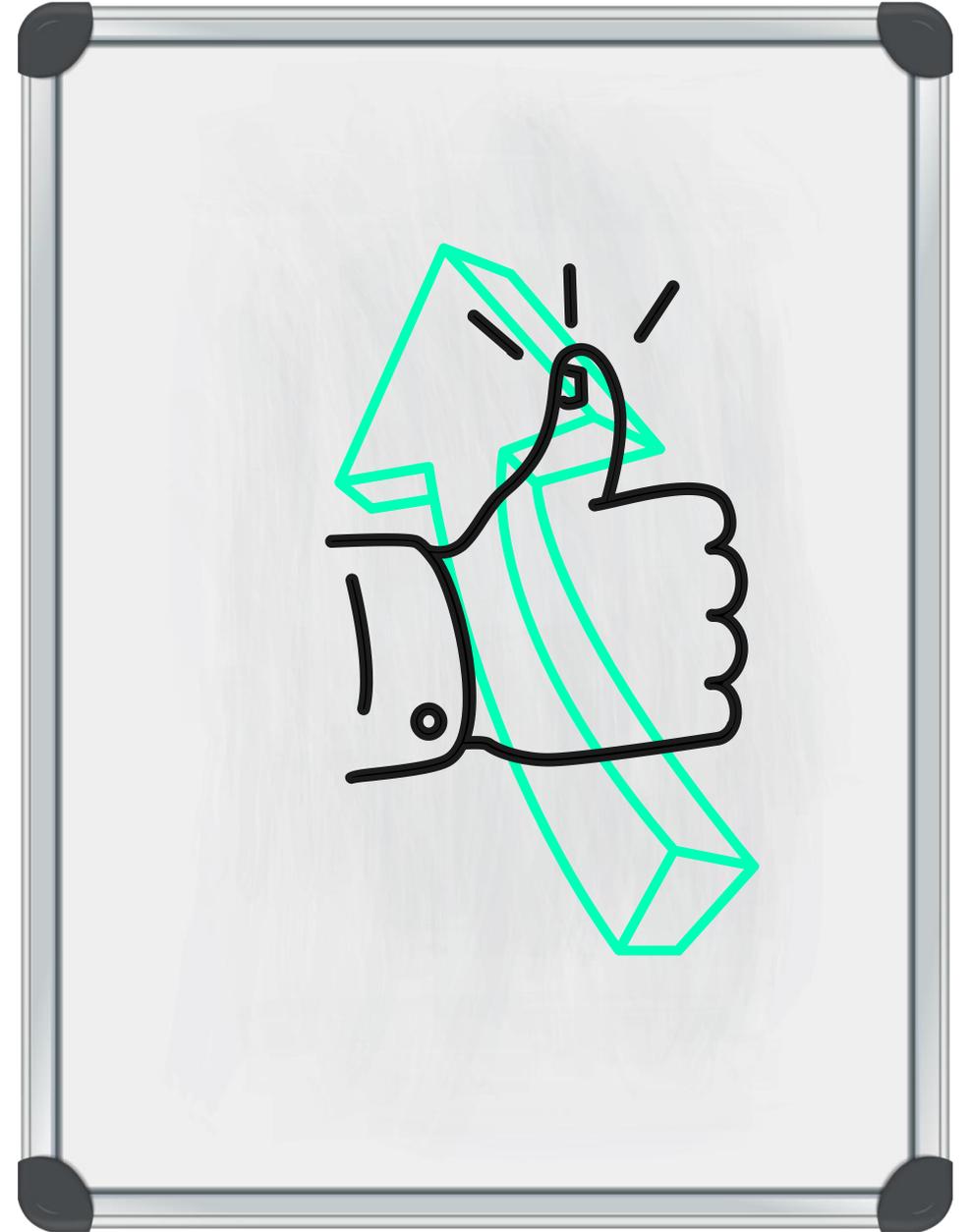
86%

EUROPE

79%

of B2B buyers inside organizations say knowing a company is a leader in reducing its environmental impact would "somewhat/greatly" improve their opinion of that company.

Source: ERM Shelton Global B2B Pulse 2025 - How does knowing a company is a leader in reducing its environmental impact influence your opinion of that company? (US n=203) (Europe n=232)

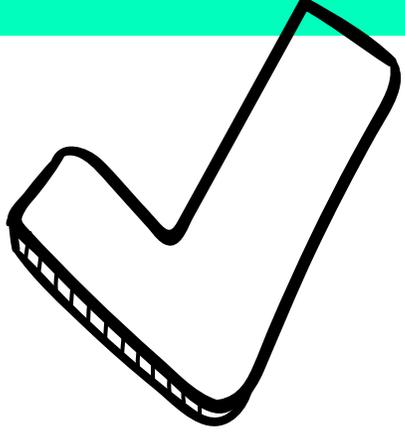


# Companies that tell a strong sustainability story are seen in a *tangible, positive light*.

■ U.S. Sentiment  
 ■ Europe Sentiment



Source: ERM Shelton Global B2B Pulse 2025 - Think about a company who has very strong sustainability commitments and continues to communicate about those sustainability commitments. Where would this company fall on the following scales? (US n=203) (Europe n=232)



Buyers see sustainability as an *indication of quality, trustworthiness and good character*, which may indicate a market advantage for those companies.

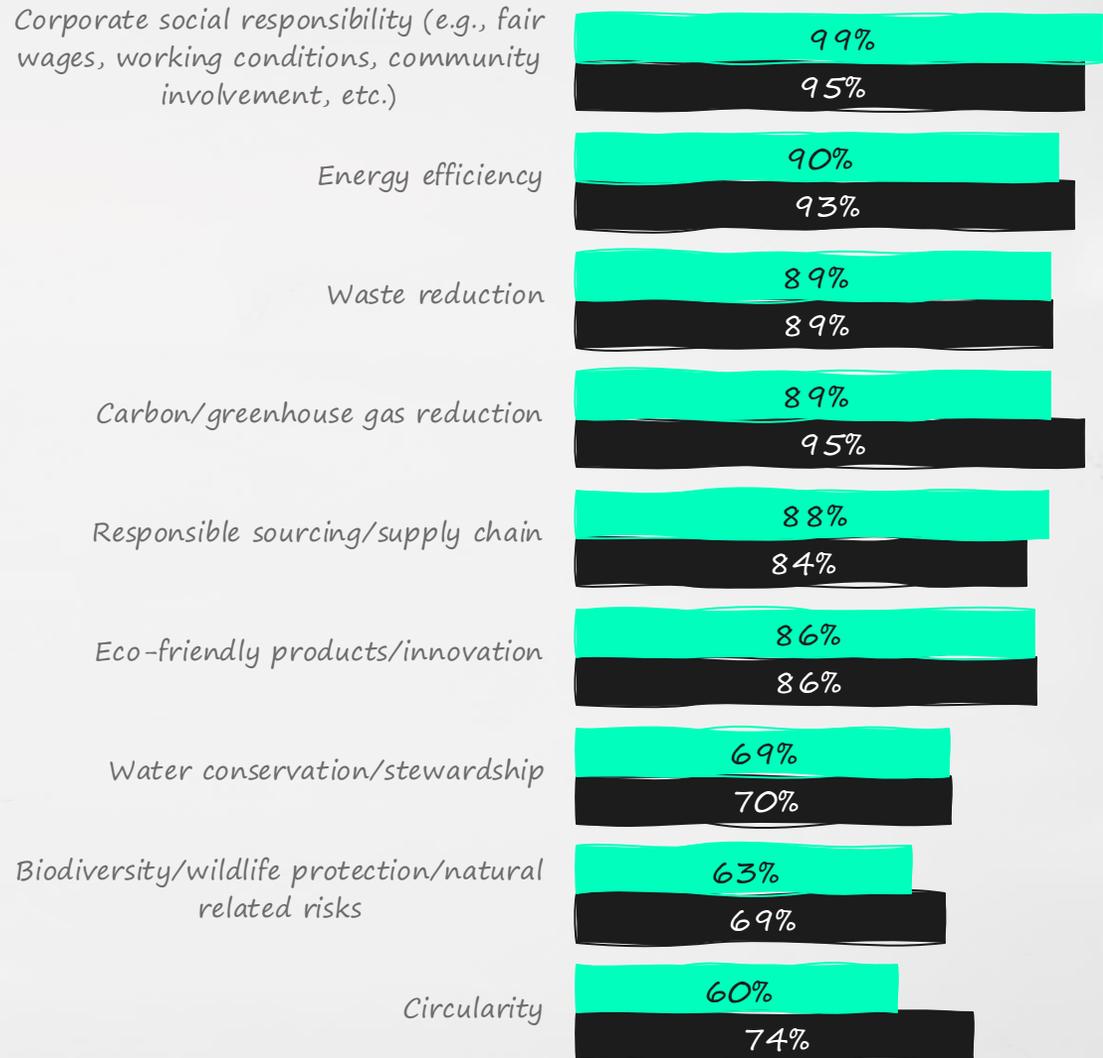


But what about sustainability commitments and communication *within these buyers' own companies?*



# Most say their companies still have goals...

■ U.S. Goals    ■ Europe Goals



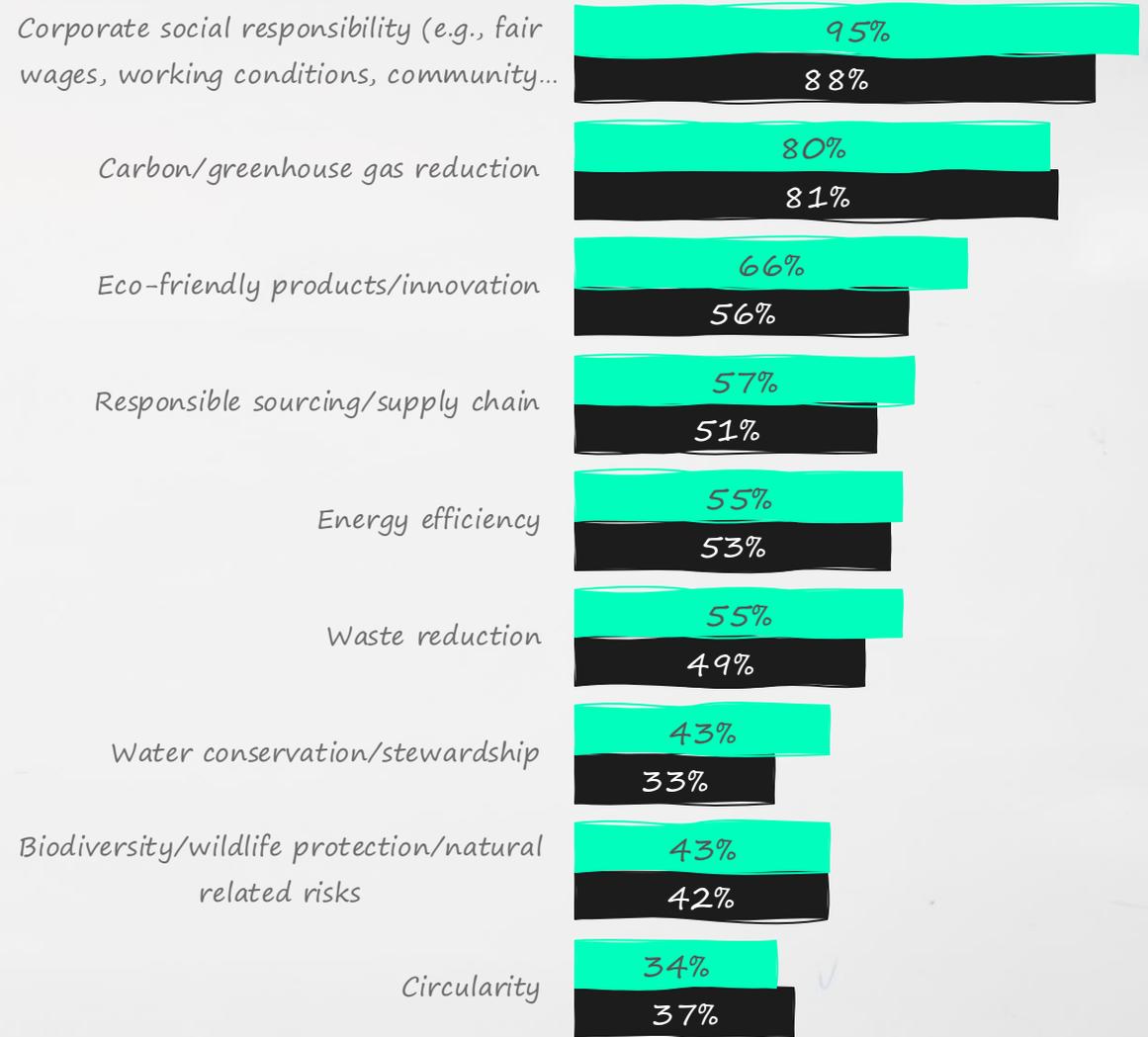
Source: ERM Shelton Global B2B Pulse 2025 - Which of the following areas are included in your company's corporate goals or priorities? (Check all that apply.) (US n=203) (Europe n=232)

...and most say their companies are *still communicating proactively* on ESG topics.

■ U.S. current external communications

■ Europe current external communications

Source: ERM Shelton Global B2B Pulse 2025 - Thinking about your organization's sustainability communications, which of the following topics are communicated proactively now, either internally or externally, for instance on your website or through the media? - External (US n=203) (Europe n=232)



Plus, they see clear *benefits/rationale* for their companies to communicate about sustainability — far beyond compliance!

■ U.S. current external communications

■ Europe current external communications

Source: ERM Shelton Global B2B Pulse 2025 - What are the primary reasons your organization communicates externally about its sustainability efforts? (US n=114) (Europe n=104)





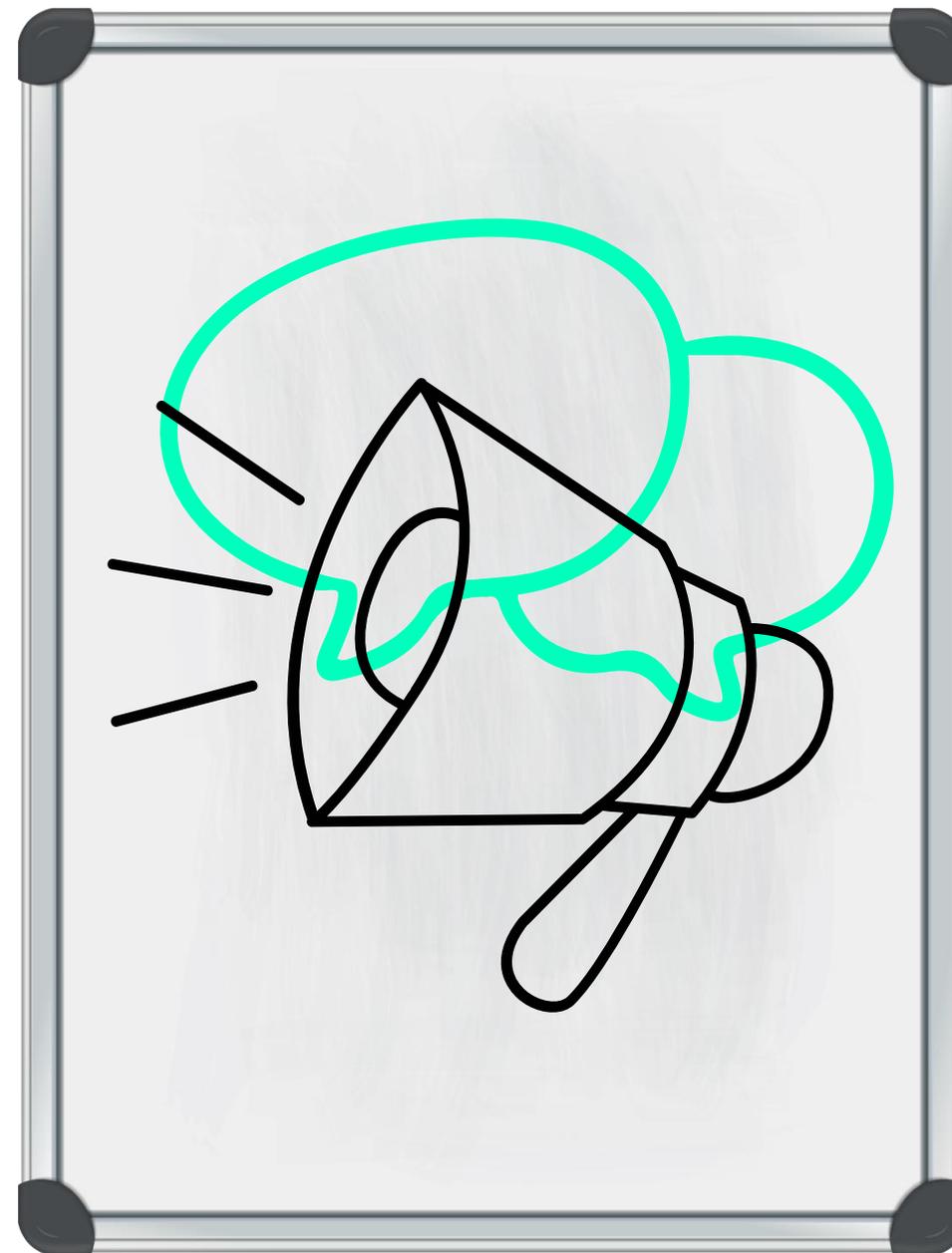
So it makes sense that most businesses *are* communicating about sustainability right now.

Currently, both U.S. and European companies are communicating externally about sustainability.



of organizations are "somewhat/very actively" communicating externally about their sustainability efforts.

Source: ERM Shelton Global B2B Pulse 2025 - In 2025, how actively is your organization **communicating externally** about its sustainability efforts? (US n=203) (Europe n=232)

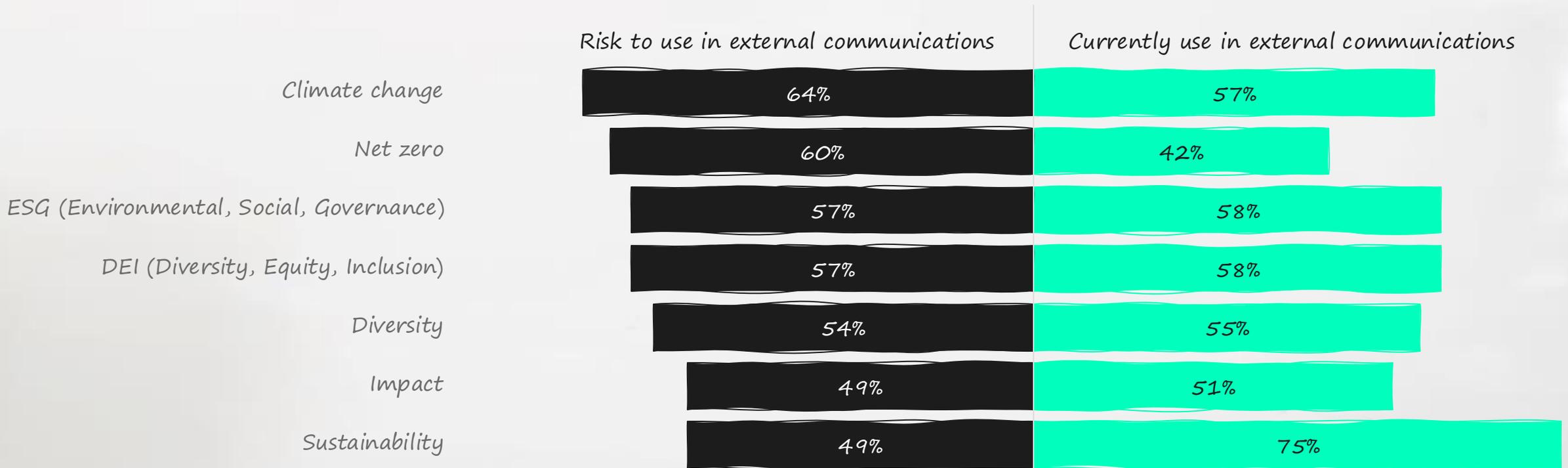




But this is where it gets *strange*.

In the U.S., business buyers perceive many of the topics their companies are currently communicating about to be *risky*.

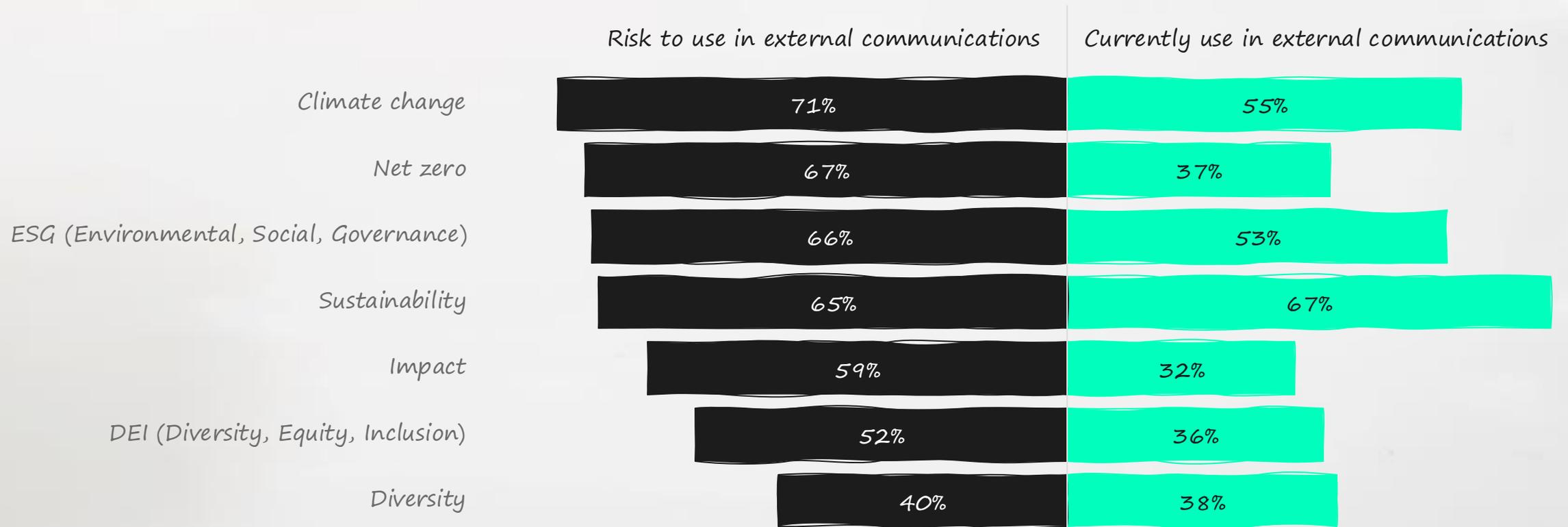
*Moderate to high risk*



Source: ERM Shelton Global B2B Pulse 2025 - Rate each of the following terms based on the perceived level of current risk this term would carry in your organization's external communications; Which of the following terms does your organization actively use in its current external sustainability communications? (Check all that apply.) (US n=114)

While the terms deemed risky in Europe are a bit different, *risk is perceived, nonetheless.*

*Moderate to high risk*



Source: ERM Shelton Global B2B Pulse 2025 - Rate each of the following terms based on the perceived level of current risk this term would carry in your organization's external communications; Which of the following terms does your organization actively use in its current external sustainability communications? (Check all that apply.) (Europe n=104)

# That's the paradox of this impending era:



Buyers see the benefits of sustainability from their suppliers



They clearly want to hear from their suppliers about it

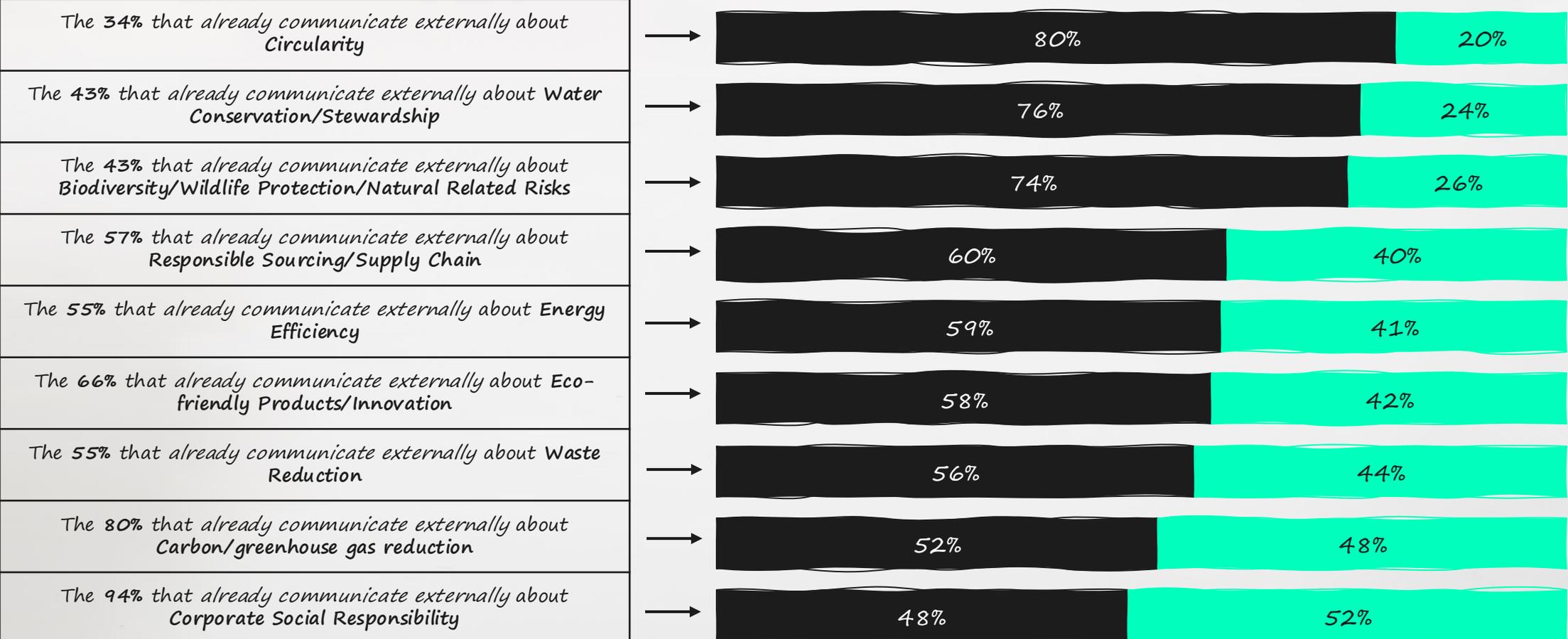


But they don't actually think their companies will keep communicating as much with customers or employees about sustainability

Buyers of business goods and services in the U.S. expect to *decrease or drop communications* around some key topics, like circularity, water conservation and biodiversity.

Out of U.S. business buyers...

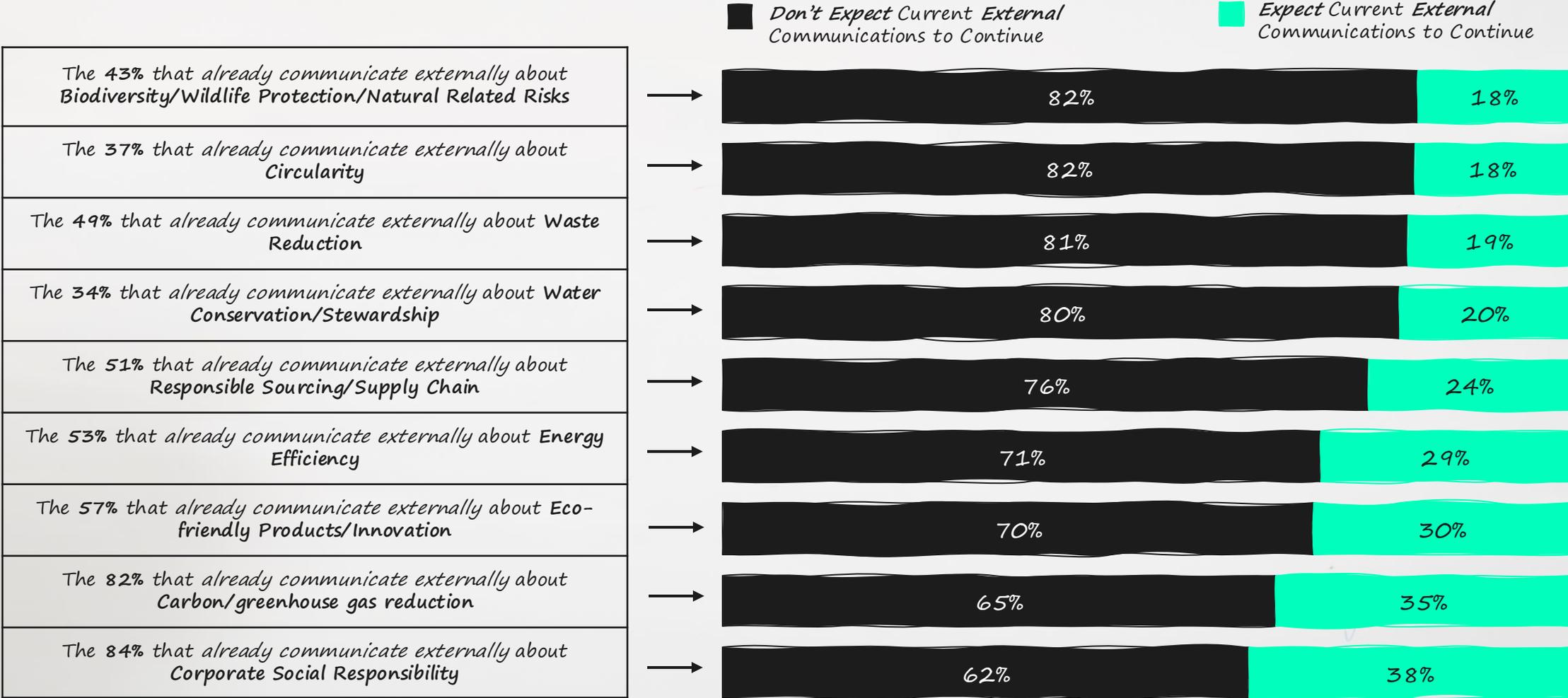
*Don't Expect Current External Communications to Continue*
 *Expect Current External Communications to Continue*



Source: ERM Shelton Global B2B Pulse 2025 - Out of the sustainability topics your company **currently communicates about proactively externally**, which ones do you expect to **continue to communicate about internally** in the future, for instance on your website or through the media? [Check all that apply.] (US)

# A similar trend is expected in Europe.

Out of European business buyers...



Source: ERM Shelton Global B2B Pulse 2025 - Out of the sustainability topics your company **currently communicates about proactively externally**, which ones do you expect to **continue to communicate about internally** in the future, for instance on your website or through the media? [Check all that apply.] (Europe)

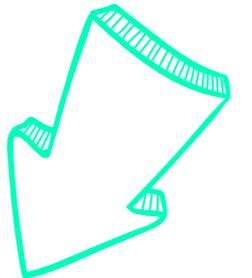
## THE RESULT



The majority of business buyers report that they expect to *pull back on communications in every topic* we asked about (except CSR in the U.S.).

This is not just a slowdown.  
We're about to enter a

**Green Comms  
Recession.**



But it gets even more interesting: The very terms buyers describe as “risky” in communications — carbon, circularity, biodiversity — are also the ones they *associate with the greatest growth opportunities*.



Source: ERM Shelton Global B2B Pulse 2025 - Which of the following are **growth opportunities** for your company? (Check all that apply.); Which of the following are **risks** your company is concerned about? (Check all that apply.) (US n=203) (Europe n=232)



Our hypothesis: instead of reacting to the *opportunity*,  
businesses will likely react to the *risk*.



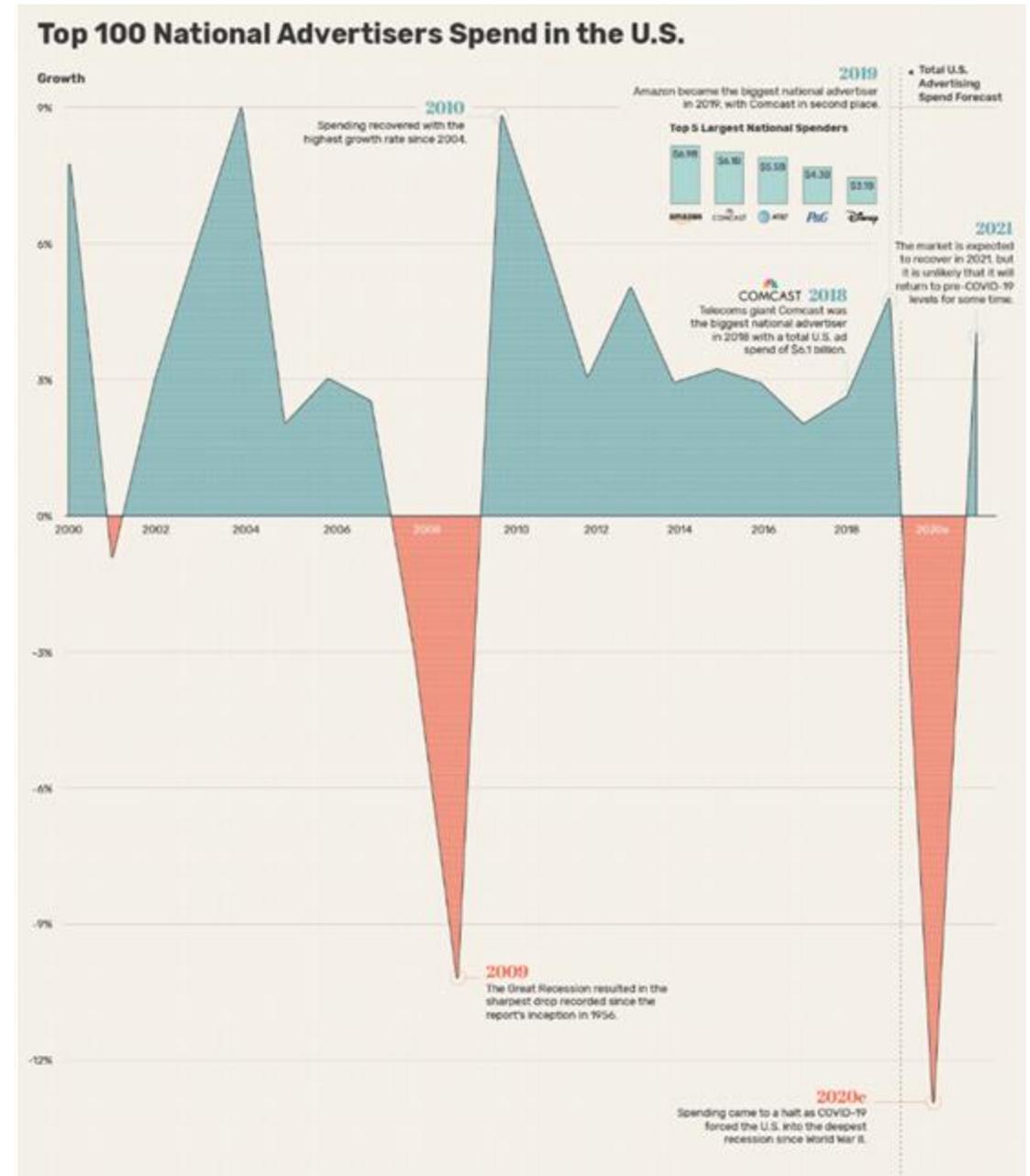
Instead of leaning in,  
they're bracing for retreat.

And we've seen this story before ...

This chart shows ad spending over 20 years. The dramatic pull-back in spending in 2008 and 2020 (noted in orange) both align with financial crises.

This shows that when companies sense risk — especially financial risk — *they stop communicating...*

Chart Sources: AdAge, Group M



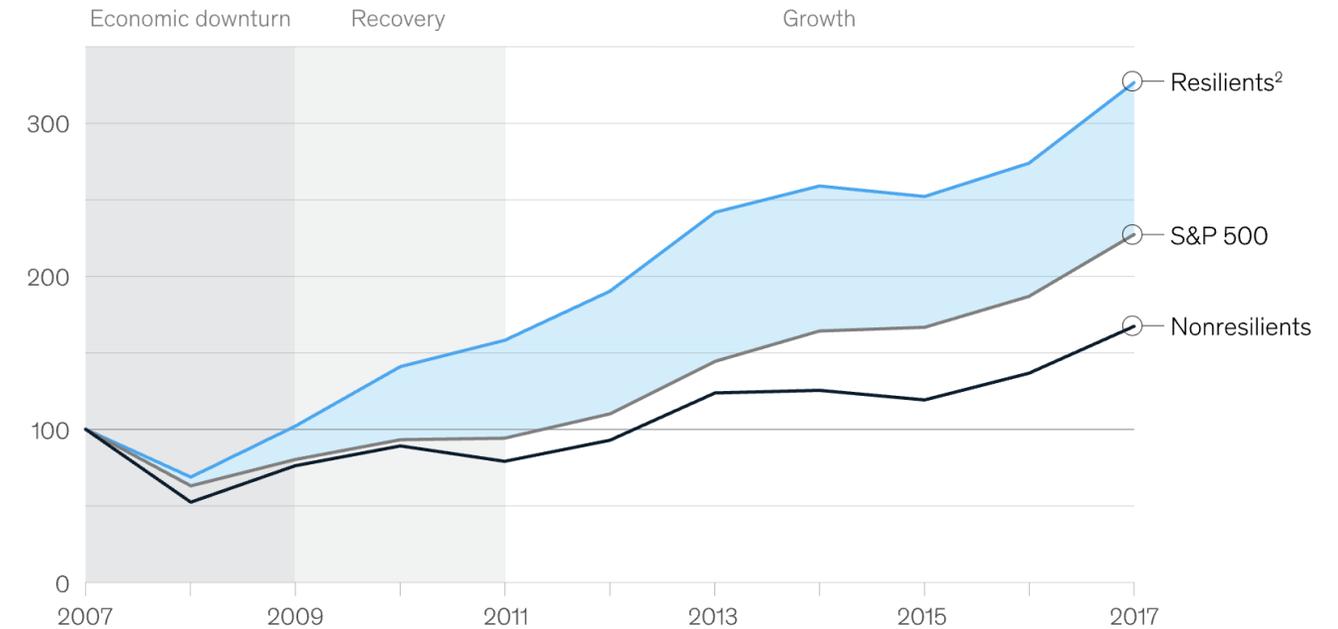
...even though countless studies demonstrate that *companies that continue marketing through a recession outperform peers in the years afterwards.*

This chart from McKinsey & Company analyzes how “resilient” companies performed relative to “nonresilients,” and the S&P 500 over the decade after the 2008 crisis. “Resilients” are defined as the top quintile in TRS performance by sector, and the commonality is that the recession didn’t stop them from advertising or launching new products.

Source: McKinsey & Company; <https://www.mckinsey.com/~ /media/mckinsey/business%20functions/strategy%20and%20corporate%20finance/our%20insights/mckinsey%20on%20finance%20number%2070/mof70-buildingupforlenatimes-cmyk-final.pdf>

## Resilient companies performed better in the decade following the 2008 downturn.

Cumulative TSR performance,<sup>1</sup> index (2007 = 100)



<sup>1</sup>Calculated as average of subsectors' median performance within resilient and nonresilient categories; n = 1,140 companies; excludes financial companies and real-estate investment trusts.

<sup>2</sup>Resilient companies defined as top quintile in TSR performance by sector.

Source: S&P Global; McKinsey analysis

McKinsey & Company

In fact, during 2007–2009, retailers that *increased their marketing spend* and launched new products *were rewarded*. The same McKinsey study shows the top fifth of those retail “resilients”\* delivered **+21% total return to shareholders (TRS)**, while the rest averaged **-4% TRS**.



**Domino's Pizza** kept advertising and launched new products, delivering **+16% TRS** from 2007–2011, outperforming a major pizza competitor that cut back and saw -7% TRS.



**Amazon.com** introduced a new product (the Kindle) and ran aggressive campaigns, **growing sales by 28%** in 2009.



**T.J. Maxx** (TJX Companies) boosted ad spend by **15%** and in 2009, **75% of TJ Maxx shoppers were new customers**.



**Match.com** gained **25% revenue and 30% more subscribers** using heavy marketing to position itself as affordable entertainment.

\*as seen on the previous page, defined as retail companies that ranked in the top 20% of their peers by TRS  
Source: <https://info.eventvesta.com/organizer/marketing-spend-during-a-recession/>

So, it's clear — history shows that silence doesn't pay off in an economic downturn ... but what about a **Green Comms Recession?**

*Are the rules the same?*

# In some ways, yes.

Sustainability's boom over the past decades has created rising demand from key stakeholders — and **now** they are looking for, or even expecting, sustainability communications.

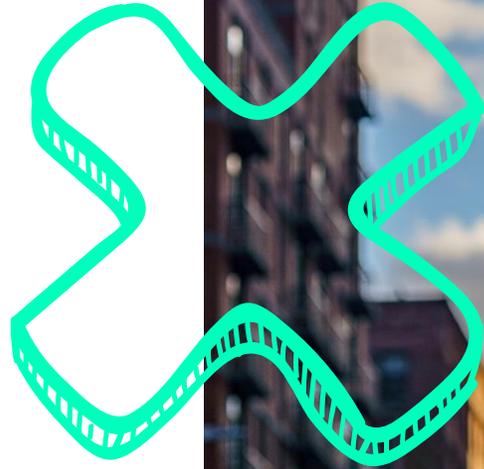
But in most economic downturns, the perceived risk isn't in *talking* about your products or business — it's from the financial anxiety around the capital expenditure required to do so.

And that's what's different in a Green Comms Recession — it's not about tightening the belt financially; it's about perceived reputational risk.



Many companies have simply been issuing platitudes (“we care about people and the planet”) or setting goals for 2050 with no published action plans with key milestones. They also haven’t focused on a true value proposition for their stakeholders. Those companies are the most likely to be uncomfortable talking about sustainability right now.

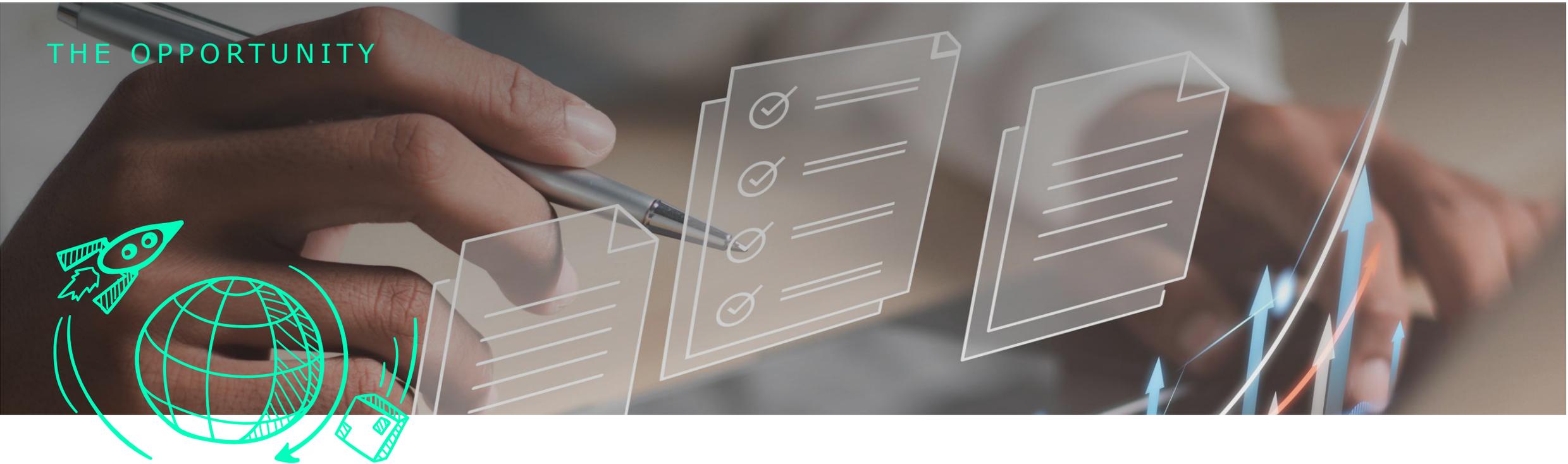
And here’s what’s remarkable: *many of those companies will stop communicating.*





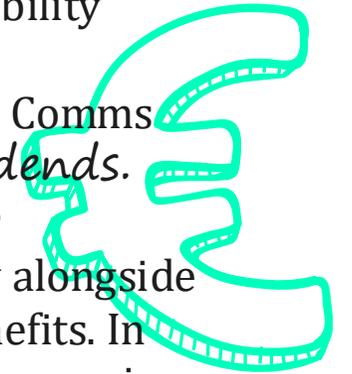
This will create an  
*opportunity* in the  
sustainability space  
*that we've never  
seen before.*

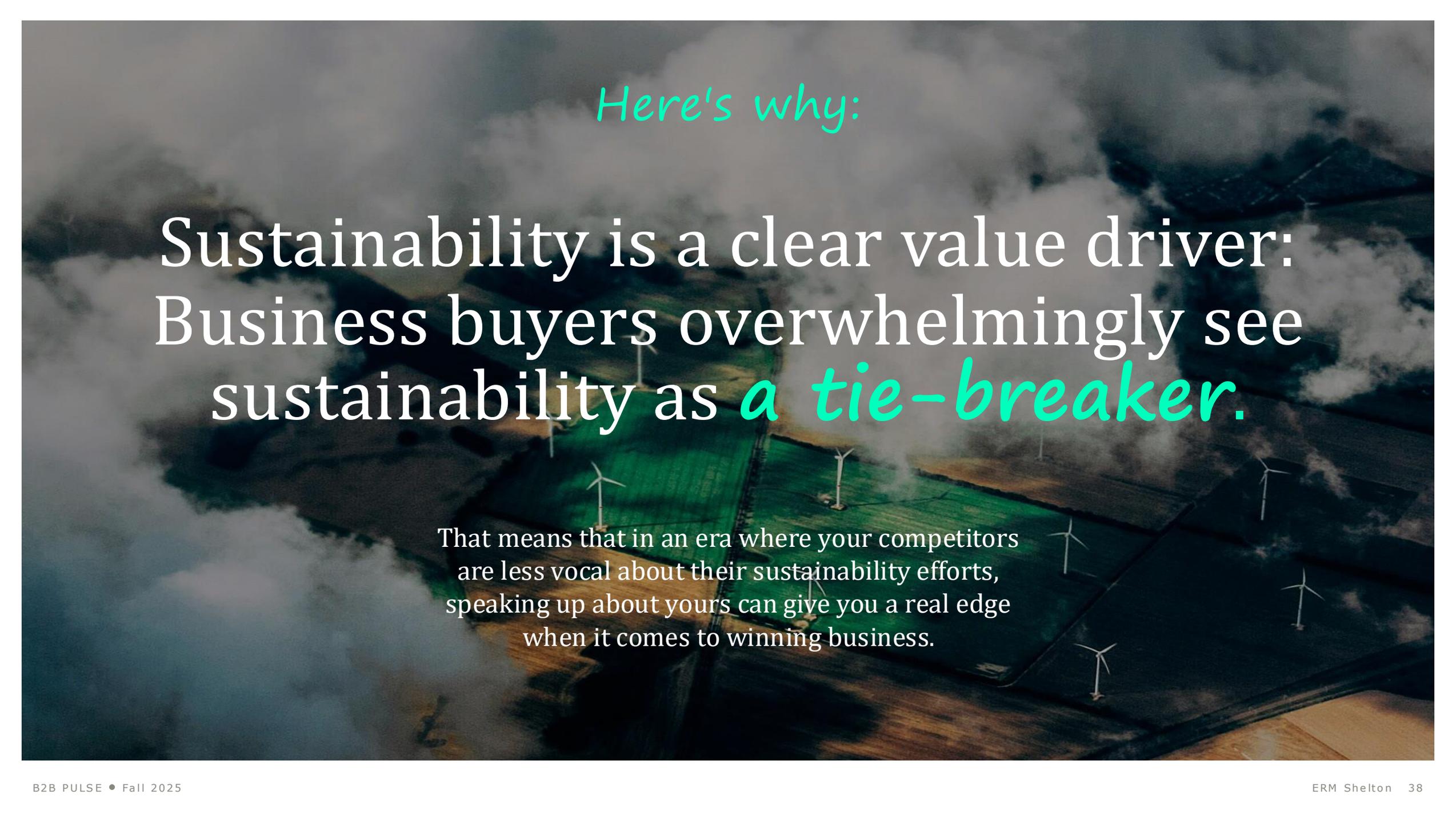
## THE OPPORTUNITY



Because for decades, we've been *proving the market case for sustainability*. But with all the noisy, distracting platitudes gone, companies with real value propositions will be able to stand out and be heard.

For companies with a real sustainability story, leaning into sustainability communications during this Green Comms Recession could pay out *real dividends*. And the greatest opportunity is for companies that offer sustainability alongside performance, health or pricing benefits. In other words, the winners will be companies that can connect sustainability to what's in it for their stakeholders.





*Here's why:*

Sustainability is a clear value driver:  
Business buyers overwhelmingly see  
sustainability as *a tie-breaker.*

That means that in an era where your competitors  
are less vocal about their sustainability efforts,  
speaking up about yours can give you a real edge  
when it comes to winning business.

And the numbers are significant: Over 80% of the time, *sustainability gets companies the win.*

UNITED STATES

83%

EUROPE

85%

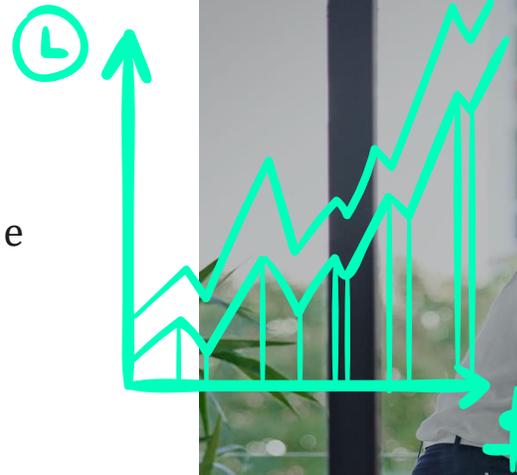
Of buyers of business services say "sustainability is sometimes or always" a tie-breaker.

Source: ERM Shelton Global B2B Pulse 2025 - How often would you say sustainability is a tie breaker when you're choosing between two competing suppliers or products? (US n=203) (Europe n=232)



But there's more: Business buyers don't just use sustainability as a tie-breaker to choose one supplier over another..

They are often willing to pay more for sustainability, too.



UNITED STATES

58%

EUROPE

57%

of business buyers say they can think of a time their company *has paid more* for a good or service because it, or the company that sold it, was **better for the planet/environment.**

UNITED STATES

60%

EUROPE

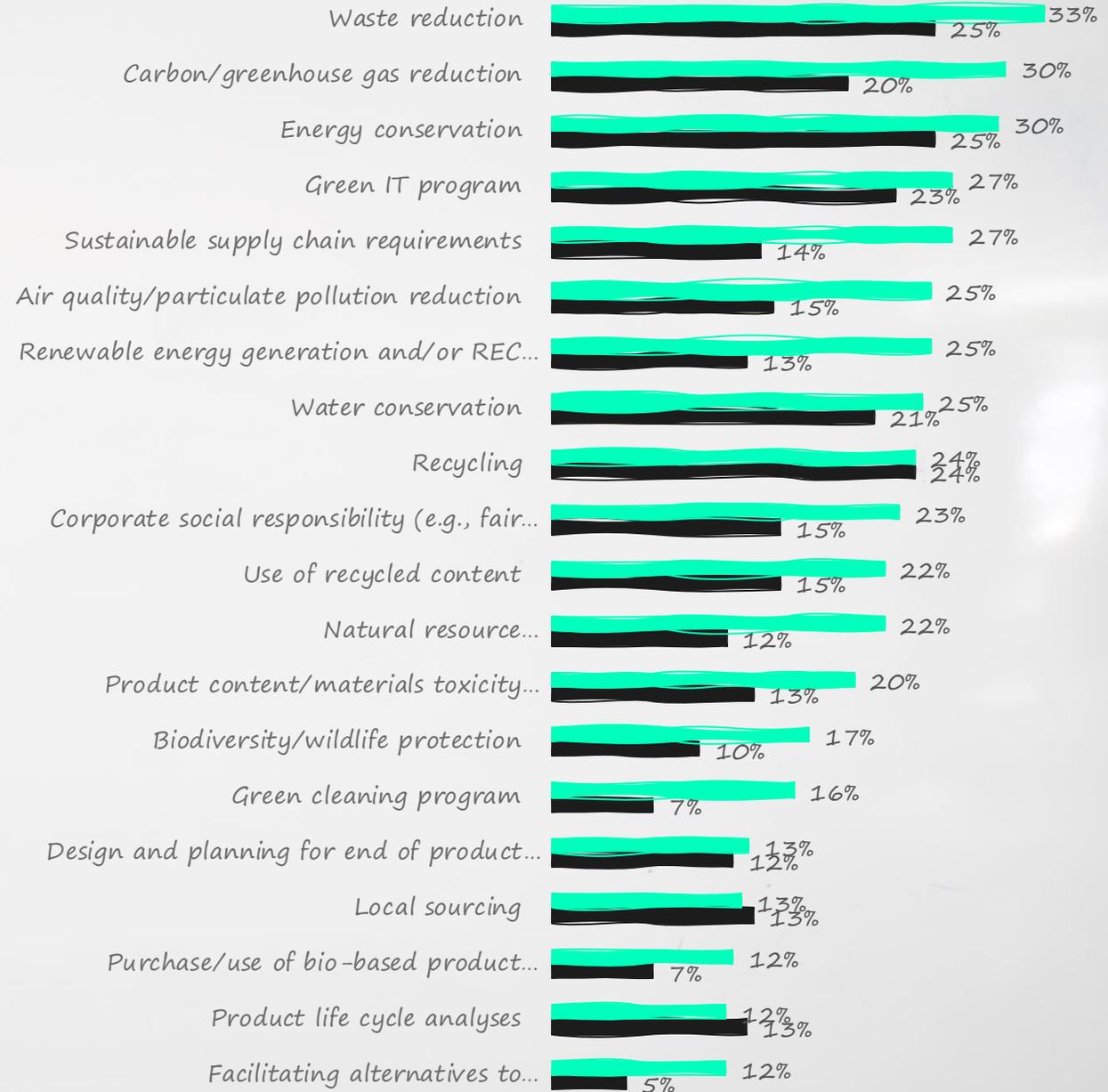
58%

of business buyers can think of a time their company *has paid more* for a good/service **because of a social benefit that good/service provided** to a group of people like employees, upstream workers, minorities, etc.

Source: Global B2B Pulse 2025 - Can you think of a time when your company has paid more for a good or service because it, or the company that sold it, was better for the planet/environment? Can you think of a time when your company has paid more for a good/service because of a social benefit that good/service provided to a group of people (like employees, upstream workers, minorities, etc.)? (US n=203) (Europe n=232)

Specifically, business buyers report that they'd *pay more* for waste reduction, carbon/GHG reduction and energy conservation benefits from suppliers.

■ U.S. ■ Europe



Source: ERM Shelton Global B2B Pulse 2025 - Of the environmental issues you want to know your suppliers are committed to measuring, supporting, or reporting on, which of them would you consider paying a premium for when choosing suppliers/products? (Check all that apply.) (US n=199) (Europe n=224)

# If you're a supplier, this is all good news.

Plus, sustainability is one of your most critical levers for driving favorability. And transparency (aka *talking about it honestly with the data to back it up*) is #1.

■ U.S. ■ Europe

Source: ERM Shelton Global B2B Pulse 2025 - What can your suppliers do to improve their image in your mind? (Choose top three) (US n=203) (Europe n=232)

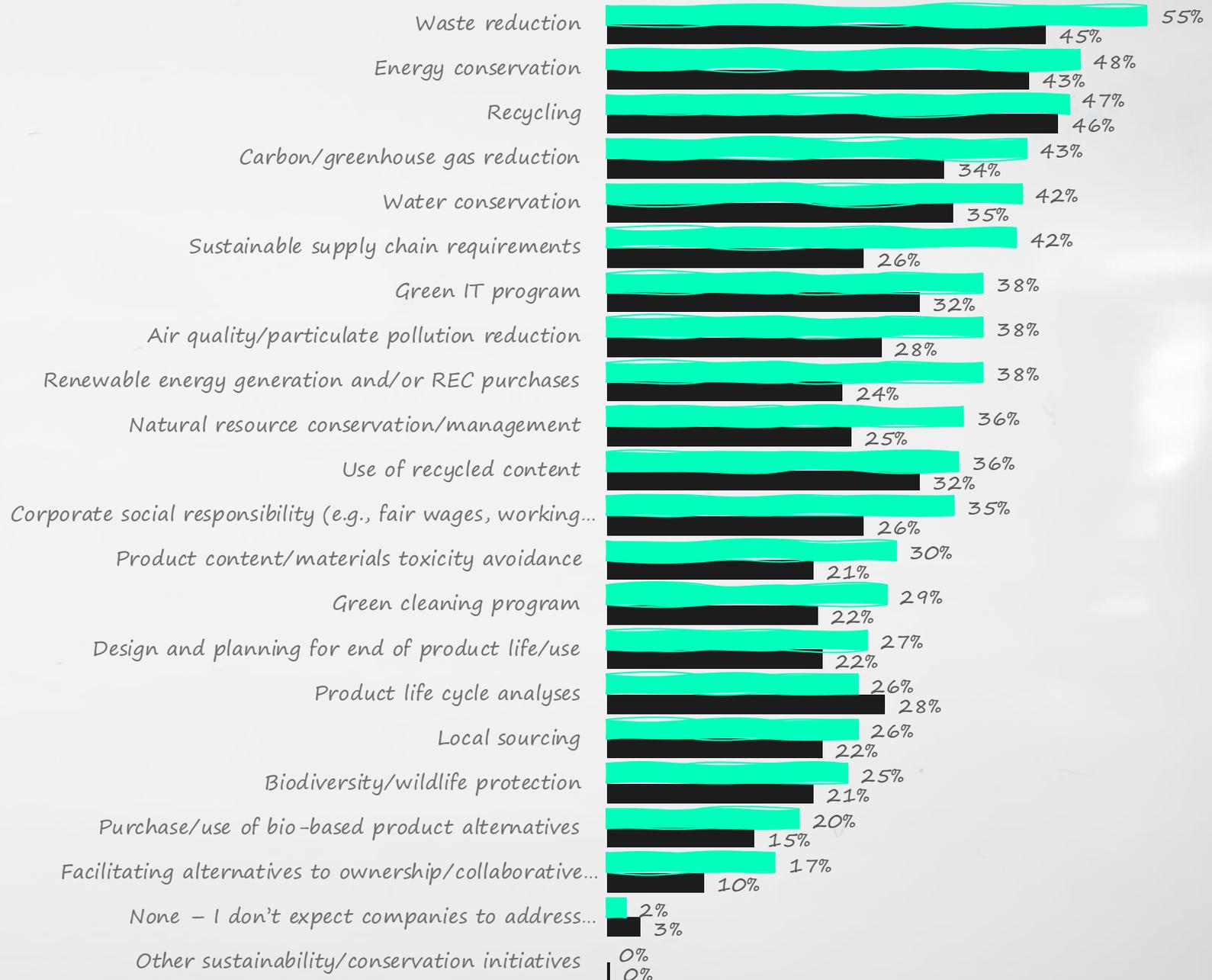


And there are specific environmental topics your customers want you to be communicating about, including waste reduction, energy conservation and recycling.

■ U.S. ■ Europe

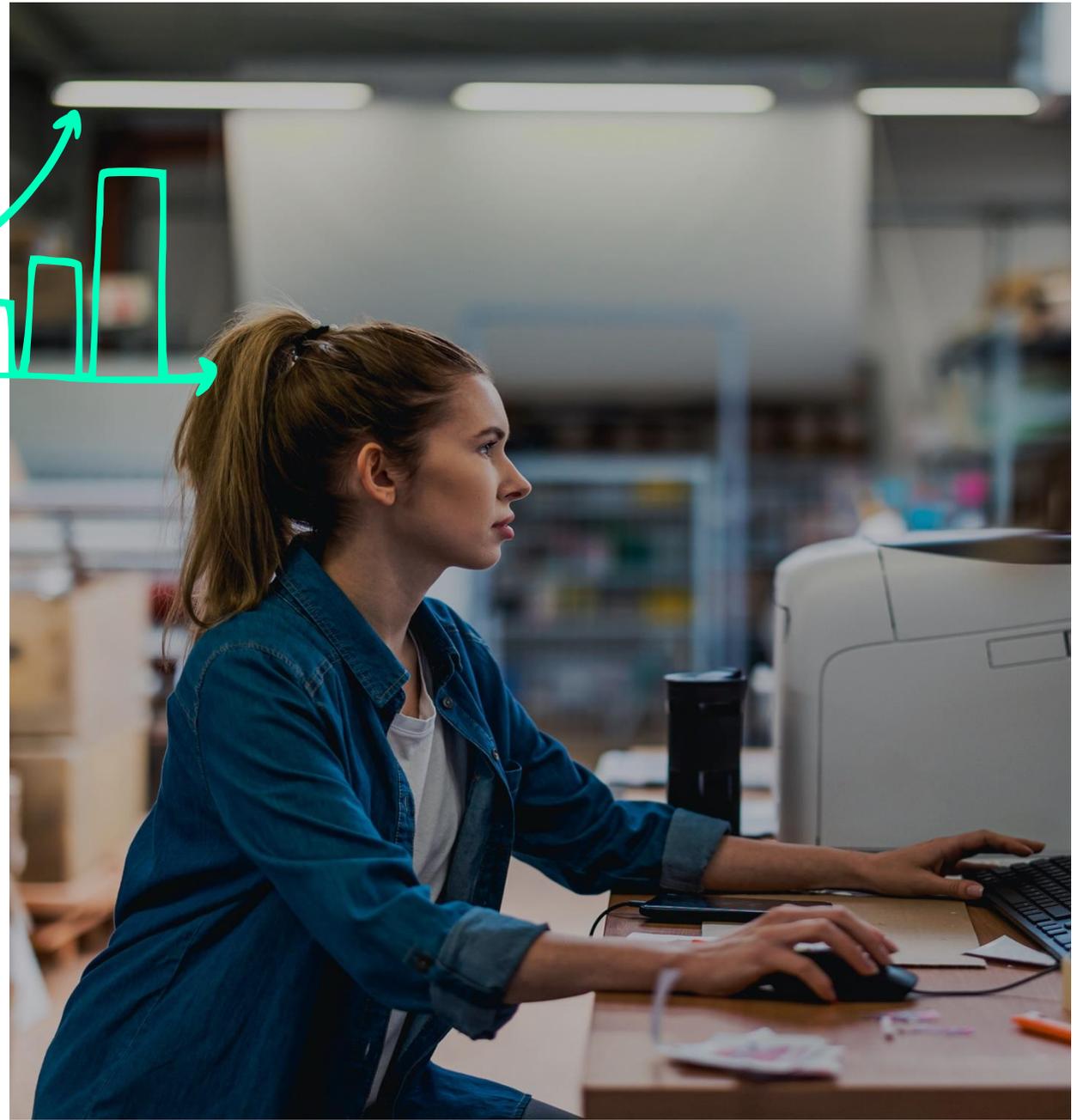
And it's worth noting: Business buyers that don't expect companies to address sustainability issues are practically nonexistent.

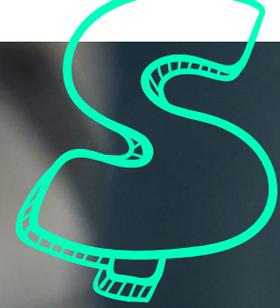
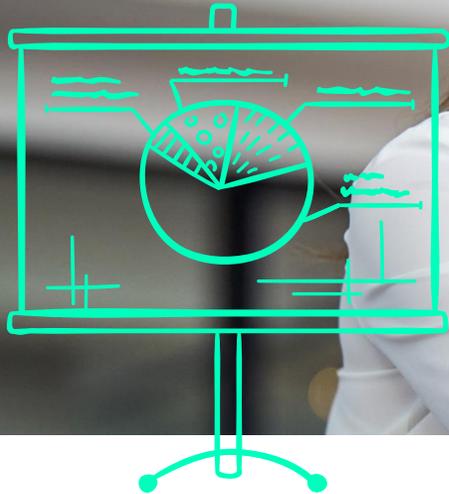
Source: ERM Shelton Global B2B Pulse 2025 - Which of the following environmental issues do you want to know your suppliers are committed to measuring, supporting, or reporting on? (Check all that apply.) (US n=203) (Europe n=232)



*That's a strong  
market advantage.*

And for companies that are already doing great things in these spaces, there's never been a better time to capitalize on it.





Because the data is clear:  
***Despite uncertainty, sustainability  
can help B2B businesses WIN.***

But during the Green Comms Recession, you have to:

- Be authentically committed to sustainability
- Have real goals, data, progress and benefits to show
- Pull all of that together into a clear value proposition for your customers – tell them what’s in it for them
- And keep talking

But are you wondering *how*?

On the following page, you’ll find a framework for communicating around some sustainability topics that might be tough to talk about during this time. These recommendations are built on over two decades of sustainability experience, proprietary research, industry knowledge and hard-earned expertise.

It’s what we do, and we love sharing it.

# Sustainability Communications Framework

Even companies that are doing great things in sustainability face uncertainty in this market. Here's a quick go-to guide that can help reframe tough topics.

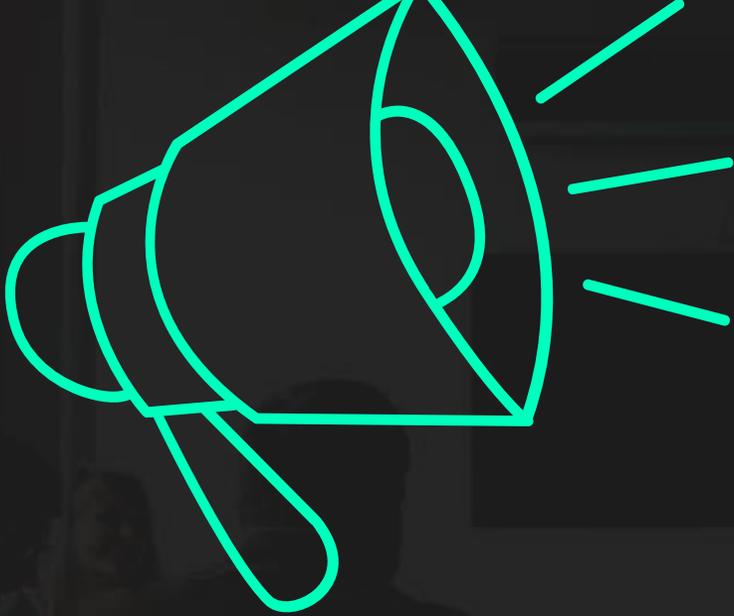
**1** Be more specific and drop the generic (or polarizing) words

**2** Talk benefits — what are the outcomes of your efforts? What's in it for the stakeholder?

**3** Keep your audience in mind when you communicate. What do they care about?

**4** Always be authentic. Sustainability shouldn't feel separate from your company's main identity.

Tough topics	Considerations
DEI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Frame it as great minds of all stripes coming together to share different perspectives and elevate problem-solving, innovation and creativity through strong recruitment and employee engagement tactics</li><li>• Talk about what you're doing to create a terrific employee base and culture that supports them to do their jobs well, and grow professionally through training. If possible, talk about job creation programs, continuing education/training, and paving the way for steady careers.</li></ul>
Climate Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Remember, most people DO believe in climate change (and that it's manmade!)</li><li>• Frame it as proactively reducing harm to humans. Pollution, air quality and human health are topics that most people can get behind.</li><li>• Use human centric language over abstract science. Talk about how you're ensuring a resilient future despite weather events.</li></ul>
Circularity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Our other Pulse research shows people default to 'recycling' when they hear 'sustainability.' Circularity is a tougher get. When possible, explain how you're diverting 'waste' and what it is turning into.</li><li>• People can visualize a landfill and understand that sending fewer materials there is a good thing.</li><li>• Data helps, but bring it down to a level everyday people can understand and envision. How many truckloads of materials did you keep out of the landfill?</li></ul>
Renewable Energy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Frame it as innovative, reliable energy solutions. And frame it as an abundant, never-ending resource. Save the word 'renewable' for certain groups.</li><li>• Keep in mind that energy can be nebulous, and most people don't understand how much we use or the impact of it. This is where benefits-focused language can shine.</li></ul>



### *So, here's the takeaway:*

Business buyers want to hear from their suppliers about sustainability. They look favorably upon suppliers with a sustainability record. They see sustainability as a tie-breaker and are even willing to pay more for it.

But business buyers expect their own companies to slow down or even stop sustainability communications. This is a huge opportunity for sustainably-committed companies — but you need to *keep communicating about sustainability* to go beyond resilience and grow market share and value during the *Green Comms Recession*.

If your company has the receipts — real progress, measurable action, authentic commitment — *this moment is yours.*

# Thank you

ERM Shelton is one of the world's leading marketing communications firms exclusively dedicated to the sustainability sector. We create a market advantage for organizations that are creating a sustainable future.

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