



THE NEW C-SUITE INFLUENCER:

*Understanding the role and
influence of the Chief
Sustainability Officer*



Authored by:
Kebrina Robinson, Global Director, Consumer & B2B Insights
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Executive Summary

Sustainability has become a central focus in today's dynamic business environment. B2B customers are increasingly prioritizing socio-political factors in their decision-making processes, driving the adoption of practices that focus on reducing environmental impact and fostering social responsibility.

This whitepaper explores the pivotal role of Chief Sustainability Officers (CSOs) in shaping the evolving B2B marketing landscape. With their growing influence, CSOs are crucial in strategic decision-making, establishing themselves as key players in C-suite discussions. Their role extends to assessing environmental impacts and spearheading initiatives that promote regenerative practices through industrial design, new materials, and innovative processes. The rise in prominence of CSOs is significantly driven by investor criteria, disclosure requirements, regulatory pressures,

and the need for secure supply chains.

As global businesses increasingly acknowledge the importance of sustainability, data from Bombora Insights indicates a 26% rise in searches for sustainable products and services among companies worldwide in 2023, compared to the previous year. This trend underscores the rising significance of CSOs in shaping business strategies.

This report aims to provide valuable insights on how to effectively communicate with CSOs to navigate this evolving landscape. In this new communications economy, where sustainability and innovation are paramount, aligning with the transformative role of CSOs empowers brands to breakthrough with purpose, drive meaningful change, and achieve a competitive edge in a rapidly evolving market.

Overall Key Findings:

1

Regional and Industry Variability: While CSOs wield significant influence in strategic decision-making, the extent of their influence is not uniform across all regions and industries. Understanding these nuances is crucial for crafting effective engagement strategies.

2

Diverse Archetypes: Each CSO possesses a unique archetype or personality, significantly impacting their decision-making processes. Recognizing and catering to these individual traits is essential for successful interactions.

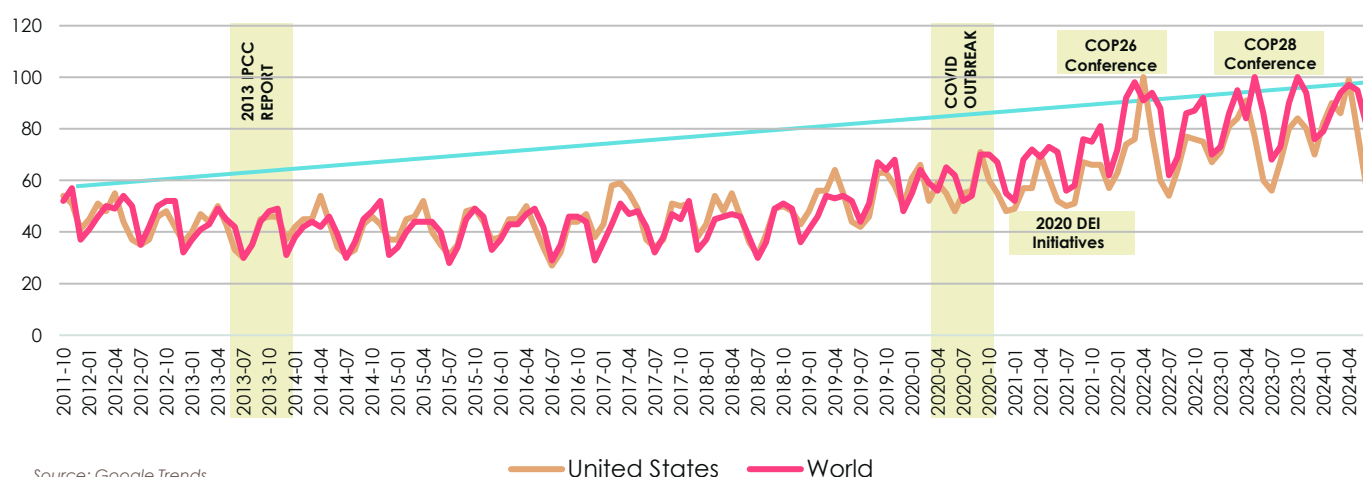
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Distinct Media Consumption Habits: CSOs exhibit unique media consumption patterns compared to other C-suite executives. Adapting communication strategies to align with their preferences is vital for effective engagement.

From Concept to Core: Sustainability Takes Center Stage in Business

While the concept of 'sustainable development' emerged in 1987, it has undergone a significant shift in recent years. Once a fringe topic, sustainability has moved to the forefront of business strategy, with ESG principles becoming essential. This shift is evident both in the United States and globally. Google Trends data shows a steady increase in searches related to sustainability since 2011, reflecting growing public and corporate awareness. Key events fueling this momentum include the expansion of DEI initiatives in 2020, which highlighted the interconnectedness of social and environmental responsibility, and the influential COP26 conference in 2021, which underscored the urgency of climate action and resource management.

Sustainability Topic Search 2011-YTD



Source: Google Trends

So what?

Today, sustainability is no longer a 'nice-to-have' but a business imperative, influencing consumer behavior and shaping the B2B landscape. Due to their direct influence on the market, these trends warrant careful consideration from businesses. Remaining competitive in the B2B sphere necessitates understanding these evolving trends and the ability to respond accordingly. Companies aligned with the evolution of ESG principles can foresee future demands, adapt to shifting expectations, and ensure compliance with regulatory standards.

Integrating sustainability and ESG principles offers a competitive edge, attracting partners and customers who value sustainable practices. Additionally, actively supporting partners in achieving their sustainability goals enhances a company's reputation and strengthens its long-term financial performance.

To stay at the forefront of this conversation, ensuring visibility through comprehensive thought leadership, a robust SEO strategy, and active participation and brand presence at key events is essential. These strategies will position your business as a top-of-mind choice for audiences prioritizing sustainability.

CSO Roles Are Increasing, Yet Impact Varies

Data from the Refinitiv and PwC Strategy & Research report '[Empowered Chief Sustainability Officers](#)' highlights a notable rise in CSO appointments. Between 2020 and 2021, **394 CSOs** were appointed, matching the total from the previous eight years (**414 from 2011 to 2019**). This surge underscores a growing focus among investors and CEOs on addressing critical issues like climate change and social equality.

The [World Economic Forum's Global Risks Report 2023](#) further supports this trend, identifying "Failure to mitigate climate change" and "Failure of climate-change adaptation" as top 10-year risks. This emphasizes the increasing importance of integrating sustainability into corporate strategies. CSOs are essential in guiding organizations through complex ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) challenges.

While the prominence of CSOs is rising, their influence varies widely by region and industry. North America and Europe lead with the highest number of active CSOs, whereas the Middle East and Asia are trailing.

According to a recent [EY Global Risk Survey](#), **66% of boards believe environmental sustainability is crucial for enterprise resilience**, highlighting the significant influence CSOs have within company structures.

Despite this, the [Refinitiv and PwC Strategy](#) report reveals that only 30% of CSO positions are highly influential, with direct access to senior leadership and substantial control over ESG strategies. The remaining 50% are 'light CSO' roles with more limited responsibilities and influence, while one-fifth of the companies had no CSO at all.

This variation in CSO roles mirrors the diverse priorities of organizations. Companies are either appointing proactive CSOs with extensive responsibilities or opting for 'light CSOs' focusing on specific initiatives. Industries such as Consumer Packaged Goods (CPG), Chemicals, and Oil, known for significant environmental impacts and intense regulatory demands, tend to have more robust CSO roles. These positions are critical in navigating complex regulatory landscapes and public expectations.

Top 3 Environmental Risk 10-Year Prediction

1

Failure to mitigate climate change

2

Natural disasters and extreme weather events

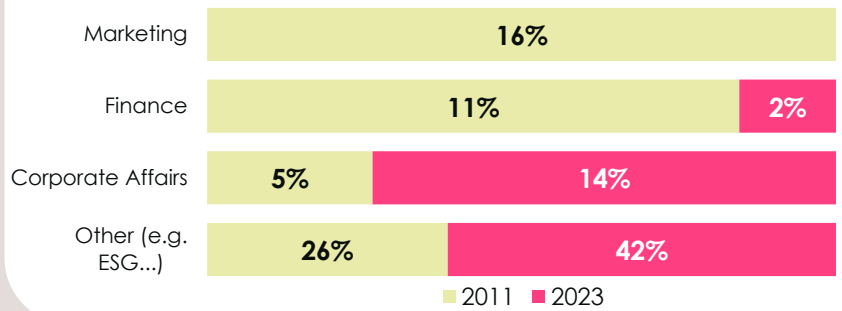
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Failure of climate change adaption

Redefining The CSO Role

Chief Sustainability Officers (CSOs) play a crucial role in driving organizational change, but they face numerous challenges. The lack of a universally accepted definition for sustainability has led to a wide range of job titles and responsibilities. This can result in internal confusion over remit, lack of ownership, and resulting inefficiencies.

Key Shifts in Reporting Lines, Not Including Reporting to CEO



Source: Weinreb Group

The Weinreb Group's Chief Sustainability Officer Report (2011-2023) has highlighted considerable shifts in the reporting structure of CSOs within U.S. companies during this period. Around 34% of CSOs reported directly to the CEO, while two-thirds reported to executives who were two levels below the Chief Executive Officer. CSOs reporting to marketing leadership decreased by 100%, and those reporting to finance decreased by approximately 82%. In contrast, there was a significant increase of about 180% in CSOs reporting to the general counsel. Furthermore, there was a notable growth of about 62% in reporting relationships with ESG, supply chain, and investment relations. These changes suggest a broader integration of sustainability into core corporate governance and operations, reflecting the increasing importance of ESG considerations.

Ecosystem of the Empowered

% of Empowered CSOs compared to CSOs with other reporting structures

50%

more likely to have a CEO who has public commitments on sustainability

50%

more likely to be on the executive leadership team

50%

more likely to meet ESG targets

Source: Harvard Law School Forum on Corporate Governance

So what?

The shifting dynamics demonstrate the changing role of CSOs in organizations, highlighting their increasing influence and strategic significance. These changes have created a new era of 'Empowered CSOs' who report directly to the CEO. EY's research also reveals that 58% of CSOs now meet with their C-suite executives on a monthly or quarterly basis, highlighting their strategic importance in driving sustainability initiatives. This shift has important implications, as *Empowered CSOs* typically have greater access to decision-making information, demonstrate a stronger commitment to public sustainability commitments, and excel in achieving ESG goals. The presence of *Empowered CSOs* emphasizes the growing integration of sustainability into corporate strategy. It signifies a deeper commitment to sustainability within an organization, prompting B2B partners to adapt their strategy accordingly. Partnering with businesses led by Empowered CSOs can foster more impactful collaborations that closely align with the strategic objectives of both entities.

The Evolution Of The CSO Poses Challenges

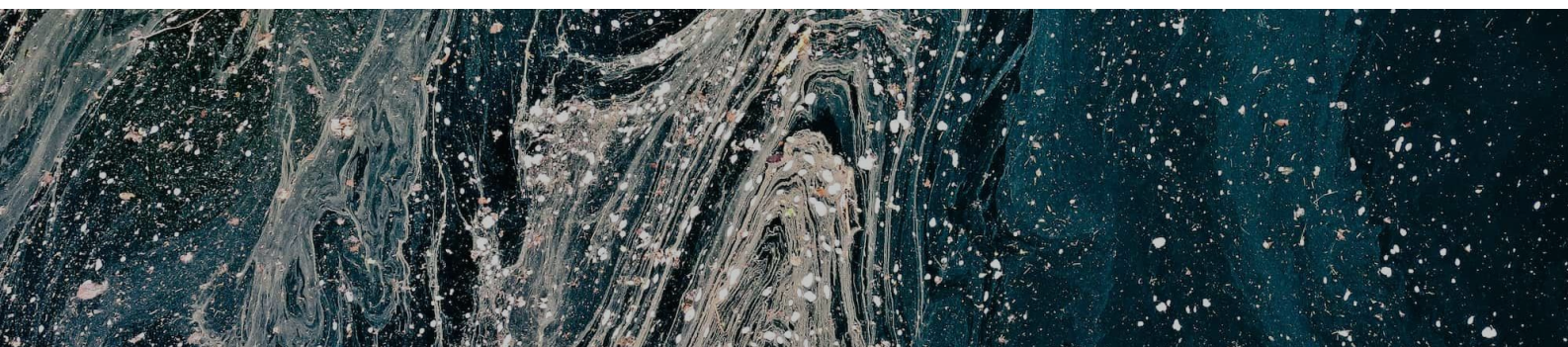
The role of a Chief Sustainability Officer (CSO) can vary significantly depending on the specific companies or organizations they serve. Generally, **their responsibilities encompass identifying sustainability risks and opportunities, setting assessment metrics, and reporting. Key deliverables for CSOs, especially in large corporations, include devising costed transition plans and addressing double materiality to evaluate how environmental changes impact the financials and vice versa.** They also focus on devising improvement strategies and collaborating with stakeholders to implement necessary changes. However, like other emerging executive roles such as Chief Digital Officers and Chief Innovation Officers, CSOs often navigate through ambiguity, fragmentation, and overlapping functions during their initial phases.

To address these challenges, companies are recognizing the critical need to embed sustainability into governance and culture rather than standardizing the role itself. This shift focuses on empowering the entire organization to integrate sustainability into their operations. Upskilling the workforce and fostering a culture of sustainability are key strategies for achieving this integration. Companies are also moving away from roles centered on messaging, instead prioritizing the true integration of material ESG issues into corporate strategy and establishing structured reporting systems.

So what?

For B2B companies, understanding the dynamics of the CSO within the full buying committee, along with their continually evolving roles and challenges, is crucial for fostering productive collaborations and providing meaningful support. Targeting the entire C-suite with sustainability messaging can assist the CSO in promoting new ideas across the broader organization.

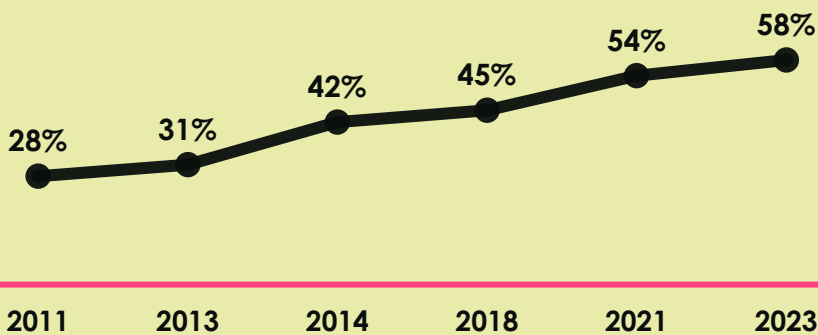
Recognizing a CSO's specific focus areas within their organization allows B2B companies to tailor their products, services, and engagement strategies accordingly. This alignment fosters more effective partnerships where B2B entities become key contributors to their partners' sustainability goals, ultimately enhancing the success of the relationship.



Women Rise As CSOs With Diversity Extending to Background

The roles of Chief Sustainability Officers (CSOs) are now attracting a more diverse pool of talent. The representation of women in CSO positions has increased to 58%, a significant rise from 28% in 2011. This trend goes beyond gender diversity.

Percentage of women in CSO role has doubled

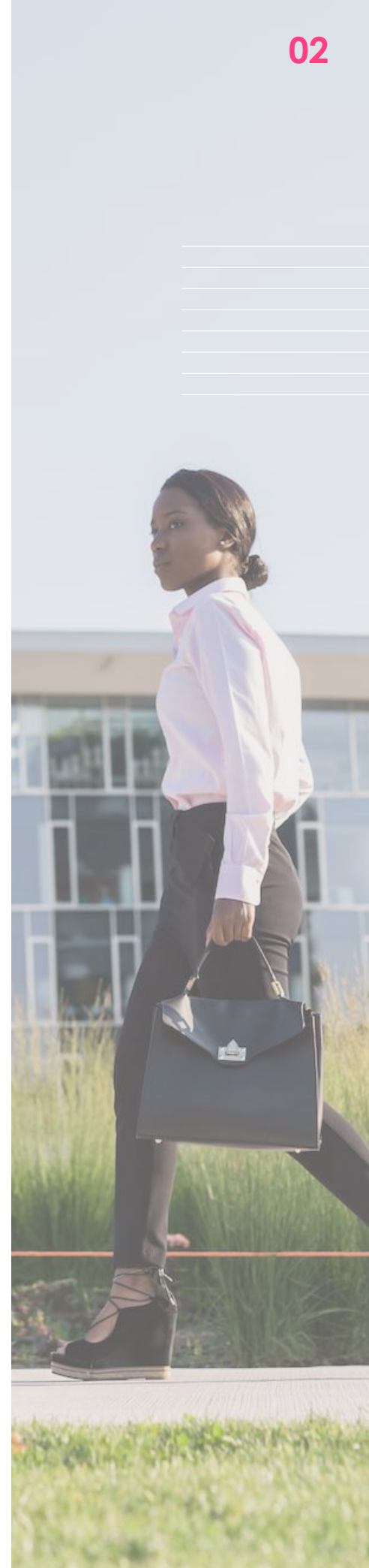


Source: [Weinreb Group](#)

Data from the Refinitiv and PwC Strategy & Research report '[Empowered Chief Sustainability Officers](#)' reveals that companies are actively seeking leadership within their sustainability departments. Moreover, they are also looking for individuals with:

- **Unique perspectives:** **16%** of CSOs have experience in law, communications, and investment.
- **Proven business experience:** **14%** of CSOs have transitioned from strategic or operational roles.
- **Research expertise:** **7%** of CSOs have combined academia with corporate research and development, as well as innovation foundations.

This diversity among CSOs signifies not only a significant increase in female representation but also spans a wide range of professional backgrounds—from law to strategic business roles. Such variety influences the characteristics and motivations of CSOs.



Decoding CSO Traits & Media Profiles

02

We evaluated the sustainability efforts of various Chief Sustainability Officers from the 2023 Weinreb Group list, classifying them according to their distinct traits, actions, backgrounds, and motivations. This segmentation provides insights into how B2B companies can leverage similar trait profiles to create tailored media strategies, enhancing credibility, strengthening partnerships, and promoting sustainability initiatives effectively.

CSO Traits & Media Profiles

Advocate CSO

Core Traits: Passionate, bold, advocates for drastic change

Example: Ezgi Barcenas, Anheuser-Busch InBev: Led initiatives to significantly reduce water usage in beer production, aiming for a 25% reduction by 2025

Touchpoints: Quick turn decision-making, high impact – Eco-conscious news platforms, advocacy blogs, sustainability-themed podcasts, micro events & social media channels

Communicator CSO

Core Traits: Charismatic communicator, inspires others to support the mission

Example: Kate Brandt, Google: Launched a series of internal webinars and external talks to highlight Google's sustainability efforts and inspire action within and outside the company

Touchpoints: Public facing thought leadership – Social media, TED Talks, Peer communities like Reddit

Negotiator CSO

Core Traits: Skilled negotiator, adept at working with others, anticipates obstacles

Example: Chris Raymond, Boeing: Successfully negotiated for a significant increase in the company's sustainability budget by presenting a compelling case for future savings and regulatory compliance benefits

Touchpoints: Strategic and high frequency – News sites, omni-channel package with core business journals, e.g., The Economist, Bloomberg Green etc. & case studies

Networker CSO

Core Traits: Credible representative, strong networker, trusted advisor

Example: Kathleen McLaughlin, Walmart: Convinced key stakeholders to invest in a major solar power project, making Walmart a leader in renewable energy use in its industry

Touchpoints: Tailored, unique experiences – Industry-specific publications, promotional content on networking platforms e.g., LinkedIn and sporting event

Innovator CSO

Core Traits: Visionary thinker, prioritize innovation, champions technological advancements for sustainability

Example: Kristen M. Siemen, General Motors: Integrated advanced technologies in GM's sustainability strategies, focusing on electric vehicle innovations and carbon footprint reduction. Collaborates with tech partners, participates in industry panels on sustainable transportation

Touchpoints: Comprehensive and tailored – Tech-focused conferences, Industry-specific publications, case studies, innovation theme podcasts, micro events and social media channels

Strategist CSO

Core Traits: Analytical, strategic planner, integrates sustainability into business models

Example: Sophie Beckham, International Paper Co: Championed sustainable forestry and recycling initiatives, focusing on resource conservation and stewardship. Collaborated with environmental NGOs to co-develop sustainability standards and worked with local communities to ensure sustainable practices

Touchpoints: Strategic and public facing thought leadership – News sites, omni-channel package with core business and environmental themed journals, social media webinars, and roundtables

Advertising To CSOs Requires A Unique Approach Compared To Other C-Suites

Emphasize Credibility and Verifiable Evidence: Due to increasing scrutiny over environmental claims and the potential for greenwashing, it is crucial that all communications are backed by solid, verifiable evidence and address relevant material issues. **It's important to maintain transparency and authenticity in all disclosures and discussions, ensuring that claims about sustainability are both accurate and reliable.**

Maintain a Positive and Hopeful Message: In the sustainability space, it's easy to focus on the problems and challenges; however, CSOs are naturally optimistic. **They imagine the world as they hope to shape it, expressing positive short-term and long-term prospects for both the environment (52% | 290i) and economy (66% | 219i).**

Narrate Future-Oriented, Bold, and Socially Responsible Stories: CSOs seek partners that embody specific traits. **They prefer brands that are youthful or future-oriented (23% | 303i), exclusive or innovative (31% | 239i), and bold (29% | 214i).** Choosing partners that will enhance their image/reputation (33% | 280i), foster community engagement and dialogue (17% | 221i) and support relevant charities (41% | 170i).

Leverage Media Consumption Habits of CSOs: CSOs consume more media, both digital and traditional, compared to the average person. They spend substantial time with print press (3.6x avg), podcasts (2.4x avg), radio (2x avg), social media (2x avg), and online press (2x avg). **For discovering new brands, they rely on virtual reality environments (43% | 135i), public transport/out-of-home advertising (23% | 540i), content marketing such as blogs/vlogs (20% | 294i), and podcasts (22% | 294i).**

Engage Premium Publishers and Innovative Strategies: **Given the messages and channels CSOs depend on, premium publishers like National Geographic (48% | 258i), Time (37% | 241i), and The Economist (24% | 299i) appeal to this audience.** Consider establishing direct relationships with these partners to create premium experiences for this audience. They can often provide creative and high-impact omni-channel packages that offer value without stretching your budget.

How to Engage This New C-Suite Influencer

Recognizing the pivotal role Chief Sustainability Officers (CSOs) play in buying committees and their influence on C-suite sustainability decisions is essential.

Despite the variations in their roles, all CSOs share a common objective: to drive sustainable business growth. This commitment involves implementing solutions that not only enhance revenue, profits, and market share but also go beyond reducing negative impacts by actively repairing and restoring the environment, society, and economy.

Below are key considerations to help CSOs achieve their objectives while meeting your business goals:

Develop a compelling business case:

- Present data-driven analyses to underscore the financial advantages of your offering, including proven cost savings from energy efficiency or revenue growth from adopting new sustainable practices.
- Provide tools and assessments to quantify the benefits and potential improvements of your sustainability solutions.

Personalize your approach:

- Tailor marketing efforts to meet the unique sustainability contexts and needs of each region, industry, and company size, ensuring alignment with regulatory changes and industry nuances.
- Collaborate with CSOs to understand their specific goals and customize outreach to various buying personas within their organizations, ensuring the message resonates across different stakeholders.

Engage the Entire Buying Committee:

- Implement a multi-threaded strategy by targeting diverse personas across the buying committee and customizing the message for each.
- Address the diverse interests of all decision-makers, from ESG roles to finance, ensuring that sustainability messaging is relevant to each department's functions and goals.

Maintain Authenticity:

- Uphold honesty and transparency in marketing efforts, avoiding exaggerated or vague claims about sustainability to maintain trust.
- Participate in sustainability events and utilize public relations and social influencers to encourage authentic discussions about your commitment to sustainability, rather than relying solely on paid advertising.

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Don't forget to check out our Global B2B CMO Report



The CMO Coming of Age Story: How digital transformation has elevated marketing to a C-Suite growth driver

According to EssenceMediacom's 2023 global survey of 188 Fortune 500 B2B Marketing leaders, B2B CMOs face three primary considerations in their ever-expanding role:

1. Am I outpacing the organization?
2. Can customer-centric marketing shift from rhetoric to reality?
3. Are B2B Marketing playbooks due for a rewrite?

You [can read the report online](#) or download the report to learn why the modern CMO is at a corporate crossroads as they must act as a tech integrator, customer oracle, and growth orchestrator.

[Download the Report](#)