



Q&A: Educate to tackle greenwashing, says Simply Sustainable CEO

Founder and CEO of boutique UK consultancy Simply Sustainable says lack of investment in expertise and governance are key contributors to the rise of damaging green claims.

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Nicola Stoppa has been working in ESG and sustainability for 17 years. She began her sustainability career working in-house at large companies, and founded her own corporate responsibility consultancy, Simply Sustainable, in 2010. The UK-based firm has since grown to a team of almost 30 and has worked with global companies across a range of industries, with clients including EasyJet, Costa Express and mobile network operator EE.



Simply Sustainable offers a suite of services across ESG and sustainability, including comprehensive strategy development, reporting and communications, compliance, and ESG integration. Nicola spoke to *Environment Analyst* about the growing acceptance of sustainability, the problem of greenwashing, and how it can be addressed.

EA: What is your experience with navigating the changing corporate ESG landscape?

NS: There's definitely an awakening at board level in companies on the importance of being a benefit to society and the environment. I'm seeing an increasing knowledge at the board level of the different topics that make up being a sustainable company. I've seen the shift from sustainability as an add-on to being an absolute prerequisite for a long-term commercial strategy. That's been a fundamental change that I've seen the last couple of years, and to be fair in larger companies that's happened over the last five years. Businesses who have looked at sustainability and ESG with a very sharp strategic view, those are the ones having the deepest, greatest impact and preparing the company for the transition to net zero.

EA: What was the motivation for starting your own consultancy?

NS: When I was in-house, I would employ a number of external consultancies. These consultancies didn't really meet my expectations. I found they were either very technical – which is needed on discrete projects – or very lofty and academic. There's this view that a consultant needs to be overly complicated and overwhelm you with complex language to make you feel like you're getting value out of that consultancy experience. I would sit in those meetings and find that actually, no one in that meeting really understood. Businesses have the power, the money, and the reach, to be a benefit to society and the environment. And if you are a consultancy, you should ensure you're making it as simple as possible for your clients to come on that journey and have an impact. The job of a consultant is to take all that experience, the best practice, the latest guidance and latest climate modeling, and translate that into practical, realistic steps that we can take our clients through.

EA: How competitive has the space become in the last 10 years?

NS: The awareness of ESG and sustainability at a commercial level has increased and therefore, the opportunities for cost has increased as well. So it is more competitive, it's a busy market.

EA: What is behind most cases of greenwashing?

NS: Why have we got damaging green claims? It's a symptom of a lack of investment in expertise. You need experts in sustainability, but you also need experts in transformational change at an enterprise level. It's also a lack of strong governance. How serious is this company really taking this? How robust is that strategy? Have you really considered how – at an enterprise level – to implement and embed that strategy throughout the business, creating sustainable transformational change? Have you included sustainability in the stage gates and project management? How does this support net zero targets? Have you included sustainability in your KPIs for bonuses? It [should be] in every single aspect of that business. It's really in the fundamental cogs of a business. Greenwashing is a symptom of this lack of systematic enterprise-level transformation.

EA: What are the most common and most harmful forms of corporate greenwashing?

NS: The largest and most visible businesses and corporations have the most responsibility to get this right. So I think that's [where greenwashing] is particularly harmful. The financial sector is an engine driving the net zero transition, it will be the trigger for us to achieve [net zero] or not. When they get it wrong, it's particularly damaging.

EA: How much of this is malfeasance and how much is ignorance?

NS: I would suggest that it's just lack of education and knowledge and lack of governance. What I've learned is you've got to give people the tools to succeed. If you talk to a marketing department, and then you haven't given them training with the green claim code, what to look for when you're making a claim, where you should

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have a lifecycle analysis to prop up your claim. If you haven't got that in place, you know, I think that's where things can go wrong.

EA: What kind of ESG services do you offer to help avoid claims of greenwashing?

NS: I think it's holistic. There are some fast fixes. For example, we offer our clients a review of their information against the Green Claims Code and other draft codes. But we need to be looking at those symptoms, and that's what we will often advise clients to think about. Where are they on that journey? Have they got the strategy, the governance? Have they got those tools in place to ensure that people can succeed?

EA: Could regulation be helpful in addressing the problem?

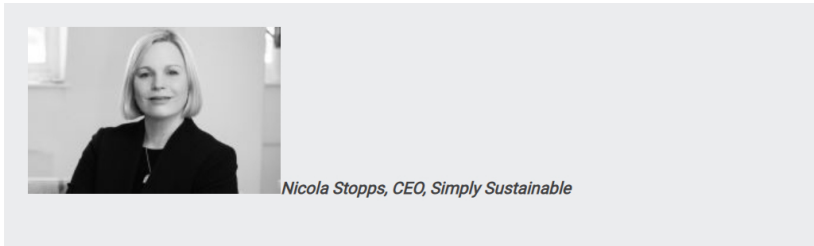
NS: I think good regulation may be useful, particularly sectors like the financial sector, just because it's got such power, really. Regulation and guidance which becomes the norm is very useful at times. Not always, but at times. General alignment and common taxonomies are really useful.

EA: How concerned are you about a backlash against ESG and sustainability, including around the different measurements?


NS: I am always concerned with the credibility of our sector. But I think that you will never be able to have [just] one or two ESG metrics, the topic is too wide and it's too important. It's good to have conversations, which are also an education for people. It's very important that all the different relevant stakeholders are involved, not just the regulatory financial sector. But I think there is a danger of reinventing the wheel when there are decades and decades of best practice experience out there.

EA: Are there other issues you think need to be highlighted?

NS: We have to acknowledge that the change is not quick enough in businesses at the moment. The pace that was acceptable 10 years ago for change in corporate sustainability and ESG is not delivering the impact needed on society and environment. Companies are rightly developing net zero transition plans and net zero targets, but what I don't want missed is the [risk] of leaving people behind. If we leave parts of society behind in this transition, we will lose our right to actually achieve net zero target.



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