

The Crofter: Sustainable Communications

SECTION EDITOR



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Editorial

Greetings from the croft. Recently, I felt at a loss when I read in the 2022 Lancet Countdown report that “the carbon intensity of the global energy system has decreased by less than 1% since the UNFCCC [UN Framework Convention on Climate Change] was established” over 30 years ago and how our health is “at the mercy of fossil fuels”. Fortunately, the report also noted “emerging glimmers of hope”, namely with regards to leadership in the health sector and individual engagement.¹

I am thankful for Paul Tisdale’s insightful contribution on why we should and how we can proactively integrate sustainability into our

businesses. And I applaud Oxford PharmaGenesis’ example. I am also proud of EMWA’s commitment to sustainability. Elsewhere in this issue (p. 72), Blanca Gomez-Escoda, Pavlína Cicková, and Raquel Billiones report the findings of their study to estimate EMWA’s carbon footprint. Their findings serve as a baseline for EMWA’s transition to carbon neutrality.

To me, there is no question that proactively responding to climate change will create wins all around – for our clients, our businesses, our planet, and all dimensions of our health. I’m looking forward to trying out some of the carbon calculators that exist and establishing a baseline

for my freelance business and setting some goals. If anyone is interested in sharing their results and goals with me, please reach out.

Best,
Kimi

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Rising to the challenge of sustainability in healthcare communications

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Climate change is among the greatest global challenges facing humanity, and although progress on tackling the issue is slow, the pharmaceutical industry is taking it seriously. This article explores what pharmaceutical companies are doing to be more sustainable, how they are reducing carbon emissions, and what this means for the healthcare communications sector.

The climate impact of healthcare provision is significant, contributing approximately 5% of greenhouse gas emissions globally.¹ The pharmaceutical industry is a major source of these emissions, both directly through the manufacturing and distribution of medicines and medical devices, but also indirectly as a consequence of the activities of its suppliers.²

The leadership of pharmaceutical companies

recognises the importance of moving in step with societal values and expectations on issues relating to corporate responsibility, and there is an appreciation of the need to act now to address climate change. There are also commercial drivers of change such as industry guidance and government legislation. Many governments have committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and there are advantages for pharmaceutical companies in adopting sustainable working practices in advance of deadlines to maintain access to global markets.

In recent years pharmaceutical companies have set targets for reducing their greenhouse gas emissions. These targets are regularly reviewed and often become more ambitious over time. For

example, Novo Nordisk has committed to “net zero emissions in operations and transport by 2030, with net zero emissions across the entire value chain by 2045, at the latest”.⁵ To achieve these targets pharmaceutical companies are changing their business practices; examples include switching to renewable energy providers, optimising building design, reducing business travel, opting for lower carbon methods of transport for raw materials and goods, reducing waste, remote monitoring of patients in clinical trials, implementing vendor selection criteria, and offsetting carbon emissions.⁶ With regard to pharmaceutical companies’ medical communications, innovation will be pivotal to reducing the environmental impact. Studies have shown that

Carbon neutral Vs. Net zero emissions

Carbon emissions only

Achieved when carbon emissions are **balanced by carbon removals**

Targets all **greenhouse gas emissions** (e.g., carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide, fluorinated gases)

Aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to **as close to zero as possible**, offsetting only the remaining emissions





There are challenges when it comes to cutting the carbon emissions of the healthcare communications sector.

in-person congresses have a large carbon footprint, particularly when delegates fly long-haul.⁷ Investment in digital infrastructure during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that it's possible for medical congresses to adapt to a world where travel was not possible; however, the return to in-person meetings more recently has shown that there is still a strong desire for the networking and knowledge exchange opportunities associated with this format. In the future, it's possible that large international congresses may have regional, parallel sites where plenary sessions could be simultaneously streamed in the evening and morning across different time zones, meaning that delegates could attend a site closer to them, without the carbon footprint (and time/cost) of long-haul flights, while providing the opportunity for face-to-face interaction with their peers. This also presents opportunities to reach and engage new audiences, and to support greater inclusivity. Healthcare communications providers should think about ways to support clients' climate goals using technology and innovation, in which there has been huge investment in recent years.

Emissions explained

- Scope 1** The direct emissions from sources owned or controlled by a company (e.g., running boilers and manufacturing facilities).
- Scope 2** Indirect emissions from energy suppliers on the company's behalf.
- Scope 3** All other indirect emissions in the value chain produced by suppliers (e.g., raw materials, distribution, transport, and healthcare communications consultancies). These are often greater than the company's direct emissions.

What it means for the healthcare communications sector

As a service industry, the healthcare communications sector must respond to the needs of its clients, both in terms of project delivery and business practices, and when it comes to sust-

ainability there is an advantage to moving ahead of the wave of change, rather than reacting to it.

Sustainability matters to the healthcare communications sector for several reasons. From a commercial perspective, pharmaceutical companies are embedding sustainability requirements throughout their value chain, and recent guidance has indicated that alignment with their goals will be a standard consideration in sourcing decisions. In the past year several companies have clarified their position regarding the requirements for suppliers: for example, auditing and disclosing carbon emissions through sustainability monitoring platforms such as EcoVadis, and publicly committing to science-based targets (SBT; through the Science Based Targets initiative) for the reduction of emissions. In addition to alignment with client stipulations, there is policy pressure in the form of government legislation; for instance, ultra-low emissions zones and frequent flyer taxes, which may require changes in business practice. Finally, there is an ethical argument that being more sustainable is the right thing to do in terms of environmental stewardship for future

generations. This is potentially important for current and prospective employees, who may wish to see their employer as forward-thinking and having shared values. As is often the case when adapting to changes in the business environment, acting early may be more cost-effective and less painful than making changes later.

Practical implementation of sustainability measures

There are challenges when it comes to cutting the carbon emissions of the healthcare communications sector. Generally speaking, providers are small-to-medium sized enterprises or sole traders with lean operations, and low absolute emissions, most of which are required for essential operations.

Auditing a company's carbon footprint is an essential first step in benchmarking, monitoring, and reporting progress in reducing carbon emissions. This can be achieved through several different platforms, although some, such as EcoVadis, have started to gain industry-wide recognition, which is paramount for consultancies that have multiple clients.

Pharmaceutical companies are offering support to suppliers to help to reduce their carbon footprint. The Energize programme was set up through a collaboration among industry-leading pharmaceutical companies to engage with suppliers and support the adoption of renewable energy and reduce carbon emissions in their supply chain through power purchase

agreements. Switching to a renewable energy supplier, with or without the help of client support, is one of the most effective ways of reducing the carbon footprint of a healthcare communications consultancy and should be a high priority.

Maintaining relationships with clients and companies is critical for business development in the healthcare communications sector, and despite the improvement in virtual meeting capabilities over the past decade, in-person interaction provides an opportunity for the more expansive and relaxed conversations on which relationships thrive. To reconcile the need for increased sustainability with business development, healthcare communications professionals should first aim to reduce carbon emissions through choosing activities with a lower environmental impact (e.g., virtual health-check meetings with clients) and, when emissions are unavoidable, seek to maximise the "return on carbon" – potentially reducing future emissions. This can be achieved through planning trips to meet as many clients as possible in one journey, or connecting with clients at medical congresses rather than travelling to the client's

office where many people may not be present owing to homeworking. Opting for lower carbon modes of transport, such as trains, where working on-the-go is also easier and there are fewer lost working hours, is preferable. If flying is the most appropriate option, taking direct flights will further help in lowering emissions. At a company level, configuring teams to support clients on the same continent (e.g., US-based teams working with US client companies) would also help to

National Health Service England was the first healthcare system to embed net zero emissions in legislation, through the Health and Care Act 2022, with a target date to achieve this by 2040.^{3,4}

"Oxford PharmaGenesis aims to be an industry leader on sustainability: facilitating and educating others on the developments that are needed to combat climate change. The push towards greater sustainability is driven by the mission of the company and the values of its employees, not only in response to client direction. The company was recently re-evaluated by EcoVadis and awarded a Silver medal (top 25%) for sustainability performance, having previously been awarded Bronze in 2021. We are in the process of committing to SBT and will be setting near-term targets this year. Oversight of progress towards these goals will be provided through our environmental management team. Oxford PharmaGenesis has sought to raise the profile of sustainability in the pharmaceutical industry through research, conducted in collaboration with Oxford University, evaluating the emission reduction targets of major pharmaceutical companies.⁶ The company is also a member of the Sustainable Medicines Partnership – a not-for-profit collaboration that aims to make healthcare more equitable and sustainable."

Chris Winchester,
Chief Executive Officer,
Oxford PharmaGenesis

reduce travel-based emissions. Carbon offsetting schemes are another way a company or individual can reduce the climate impact of business development activities associated with travel, but these should be seen as complementary to, rather than a replacement of, efforts to reduce primary

New Special Interest Groups

Welcome to our new special interest groups!





carbon emissions.

Companies and individuals should consider the working environment of their offices. For some employees, working from home avoids the carbon emissions associated with travelling to the office, but for others there may be a benefit to working in a shared space, with face-to-face human interaction, where the heating, cooling, and lighting emissions are shared among multiple occupants. The mode of transport when travelling to and from the office can also have big impact on carbon emissions: walking and cycling produce zero emissions, and public transport is better than travelling by car. Where travelling by car is the only option, employees could set up carpooling schemes, or switch to electric vehicles. Often overlooked, the digital carbon footprint of companies (servers, websites, internet searches) represents a growing proportion of total emissions. Companies should engage with their suppliers to seek further information on low carbon digital solutions; for example, net zero data centres. Finally, although this article has focused on carbon emissions and travel, other actions such as reducing resource and water use, or recycling, all play a part in supporting the shared goals of sustainability.

A sustainable future

Many healthcare communications consultancies and individuals are at the start of their journey towards a more sustainable world; however, we owe it to future generations to move with purpose and direction in tackling climate change. If the healthcare communications sector takes the initiative in reducing its carbon footprint, and supporting our clients to meet their targets, it will benefit everyone.

Practical tips for freelancers

Calculate your carbon footprint. Start by measuring your current carbon emissions. A list of calculators can be found here at <https://footprinthero.com/best-carbon-footprint-calculators>.

Set a goal. Set an ambitious but realistic target for reducing carbon emissions over a specified timeline. For example, a reduction of 25% over the next 12 months, and once you hit that target revise it to go lower.

Take action. Consider how clients are reducing their carbon footprint and whether you can reflect this in your own business practices. This could be prioritising local or regional travel over long-haul flights. Think about how you heat your home office or shared workspace – turning down the thermostat 1–2° can make a big difference. If you have a network of colleagues or acquaintances with similar ambitions to be more sustainable, you could set challenges for one another to meet your targets. Start small if that's easier but stay on the pathway to reducing carbon emissions.

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