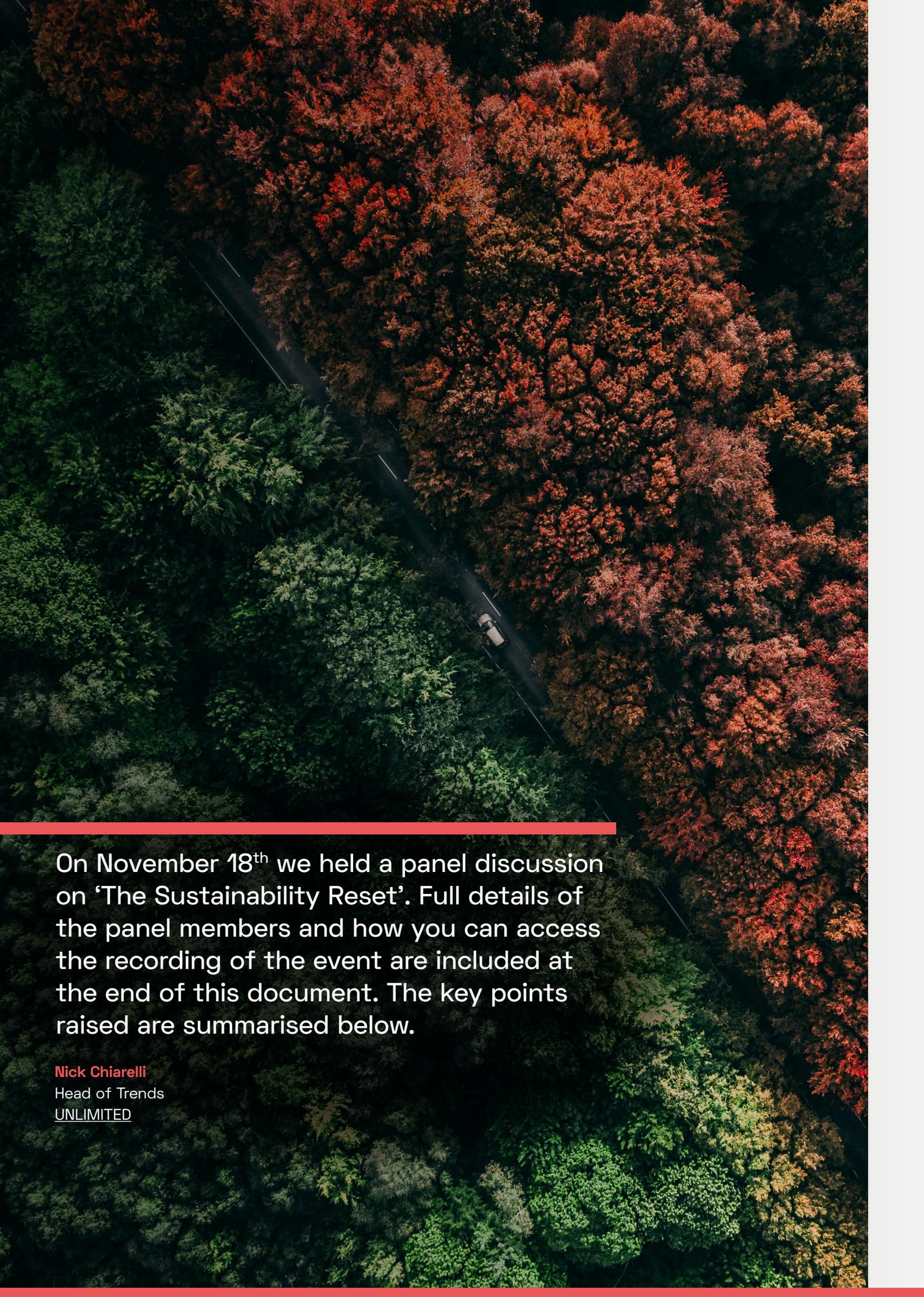


# THE SUSTAINABILITY RESET

Communicating brand  
purpose in the new world

An aerial photograph of a forest. The left side of the image shows dense green trees, while the right side shows trees with vibrant autumn foliage in shades of orange, red, and brown. A dark road with white lane markings runs diagonally from the top left towards the bottom right. A small white car is visible on the road, positioned roughly in the center of the image. A solid red horizontal bar is located at the bottom of the image, partially overlapping the text area.

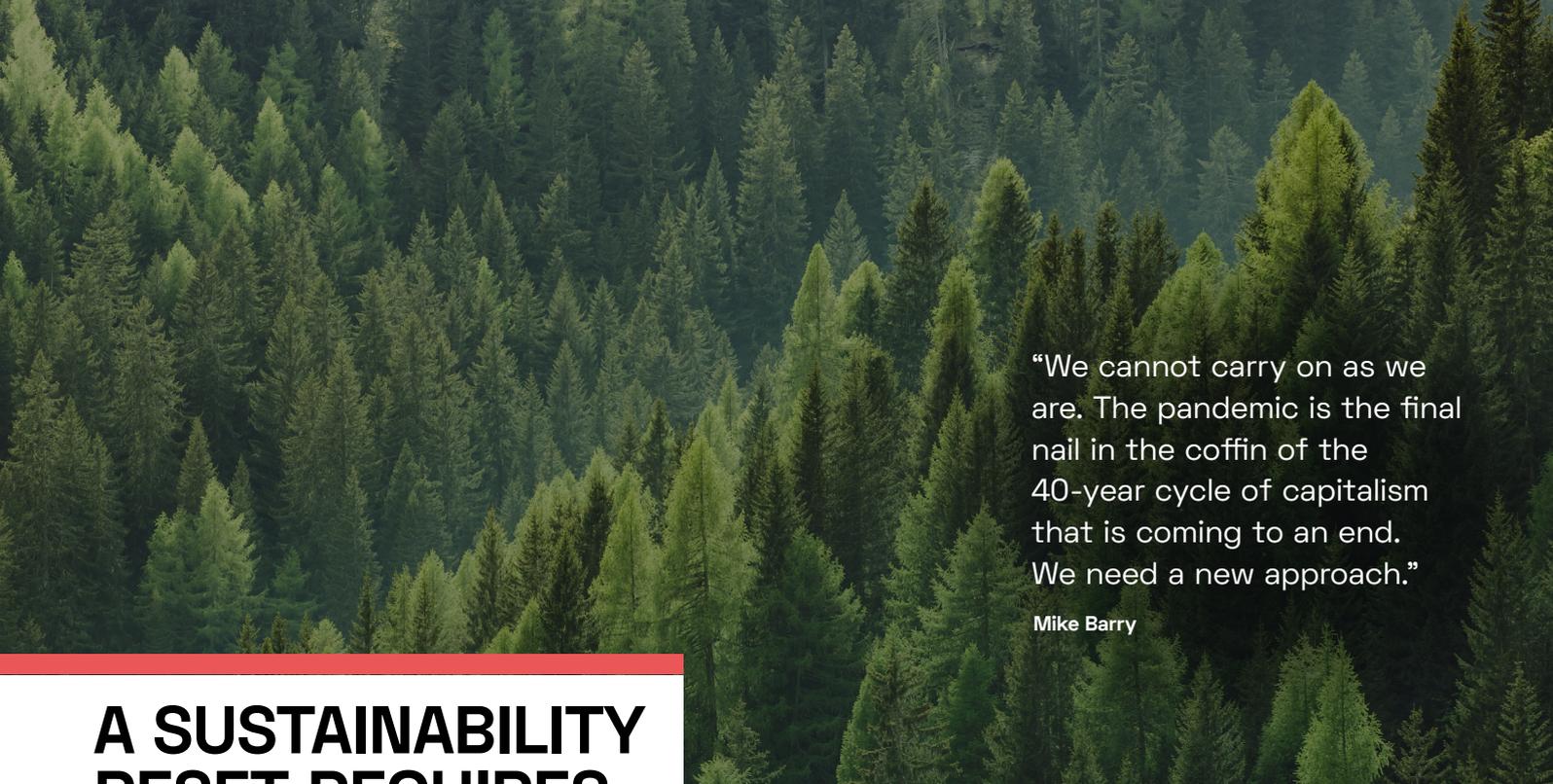
On November 18<sup>th</sup> we held a panel discussion on ‘The Sustainability Reset’. Full details of the panel members and how you can access the recording of the event are included at the end of this document. The key points raised are summarised below.

**Nick Chiarelli**

Head of Trends

UNLIMITED





“We cannot carry on as we are. The pandemic is the final nail in the coffin of the 40-year cycle of capitalism that is coming to an end. We need a new approach.”

Mike Barry

# A SUSTAINABILITY RESET REQUIRES A MINDSET SHIFT

For a whole host of reasons, we need a Sustainability Reset, firstly to get back to where we were pre-COVID but, ideally to make rapid advancements in sustainable living. Boris Johnson’s announcement of a 10-point Green Recovery plan seems to be coming at just the right moment. The key questions we put to our esteemed webinar panel were just what such a reset should look like and how is it best to be communicated, both internally and externally.

A reset on sustainability is much needed but, rather than being something we need to create afresh, it is already underway, albeit in a slightly unstructured, messy, and inconsistent fashion. To some extent, this is inevitable. Action is needed so urgently that brands and lobby groups must avoid the temptation to wait until perfect solutions are in place and instead accept small, incremental improvements, and some missteps here and there.

“As long as unlimited growth is the end goal for brands, it’s one step forward, two steps back on sustainability improvements.”

Kellie Dalton



**The reset will require simultaneous work on several fronts, including, but not limited to, the following:**



A mindset shift away from consumption for its own sake



The gradual removal or retirement of obsolete attitudes, practices, and business models both at the level of individual corporations but also at a broader, societal level



A recognition that there is nothing inconsistent between economic growth and green transition



Business change must be transparent and publicly disclosed in a consistent, credible, and comprehensive way, so that businesses can be held to account and winning strategies can be easily replicated



Widespread adoption of tech-based sustainability tools that interrogate, track, trace, and change



Shift some efforts away from sustainability standards and audits towards greater engagement of customers, colleagues, investors, and communities



An acceptance at senior level that we are all implicated in the systemic issues, we are part of the capitalist systems and a commitment to becoming part of the solution



“People don’t expect perfection. We are seeing time and time again that citizens are prepared to be patient with businesses. They recognise that they’ve got to turn the Titanic and that will take time. But we have to be open about how we are enabling that process.”

Jessi Baker

“Revolutions are about people. A sustainability reset is coming about because of an increasing appetite among people to see things done differently. That means disruptors like ourselves are pushing on an already open door.”

Louise Wilson



“If we don’t fix the climate emergency issue, we’re wasting our time with everything else - it will make all the other problems much bigger.”

Louise Wilson

# SUSTAINABILITY COMMUNICATIONS WILL ALSO NEED A RESET

A sustainability reset will not only require a mindset shift amongst all players and a raft of new innovative product and service models. It will also require a reset in all aspects of communications strategies - messaging tone, language, audiences, and channels. Here are five key pillars to consider:

## PILLAR 1

### **Recognise sustainability as an equal and related priority**

At present, consumers and businesses alike are beset by challenges: the triumvirate of health, economy, and sustainability. Those communicating around sustainability should not feel the need to deprioritise their work (for fear that consumer and business priorities may lie elsewhere) but instead should seek to demonstrate the inter-relatedness of these issues and the concept that action on any one of them, indirectly impacts the others too. We must accept that low-carbon transition is not easy to do and that we will have to make compromises along the way. We will have to make difficult decisions too. Sometimes they may not be best solution, but we cannot do nothing.

## PILLAR 2

### **Emphasise collective responsibility**

Given what has gone on this year it is entirely understandable and expected that consumers may want to get back to consuming but we need to bring people together to share a conversation and look at how we consume together, as a society, not just as individuals.

## PILLAR 3

### **Talk to both wide and narrow audiences**

Recent research has suggested that 1% of the global population is responsible for 50% of all aviation emissions, raising the question as to whether sustainability comms should be fully democratised or, instead, targeted at the worst “offenders”. Rather than thinking of this as a targeting issue, instead it should be regarded in terms of messaging. Consumers are highly segmented on sustainability and this diversity needs to be reflected in the messages that are direct to each group. Roughly speaking, 10% of people are passionately green and will actively seek out your sustainability content. Around 35% want much greener versions of current options and are happy to resell, reduce meat consumption and consume differently. A similar number are concerned about the future through the lens of where they live - for them you will need to bring solutions that are locally relevant. The remaining 20% or so are the real challenge as they persistently refuse to engage with green issues.

#### PILLAR 4

##### **Use clear language and be prepared to educate where necessary**

As was the case in health and nutrition messaging a decade or so ago, sustainability claims and messaging suffer from at least two language problems. First, there is no clear understanding (nor legal grounding) in what certain terms (like “eco-friendly”, for example) mean, enabling the unscrupulous to bandy them around to cause confusion. Secondly, where brands attempt to talk in concrete terms they may use complex, scientific jargon that may put consumers off. What is needed is a blend of simplicity with credibility. Condé Nast’s [glossary](#) of sustainable fashion terminology is a good example of someone seeking to address this issue.

#### PILLAR 5

##### **Underpin all communications with rigorous planning and measurement:**

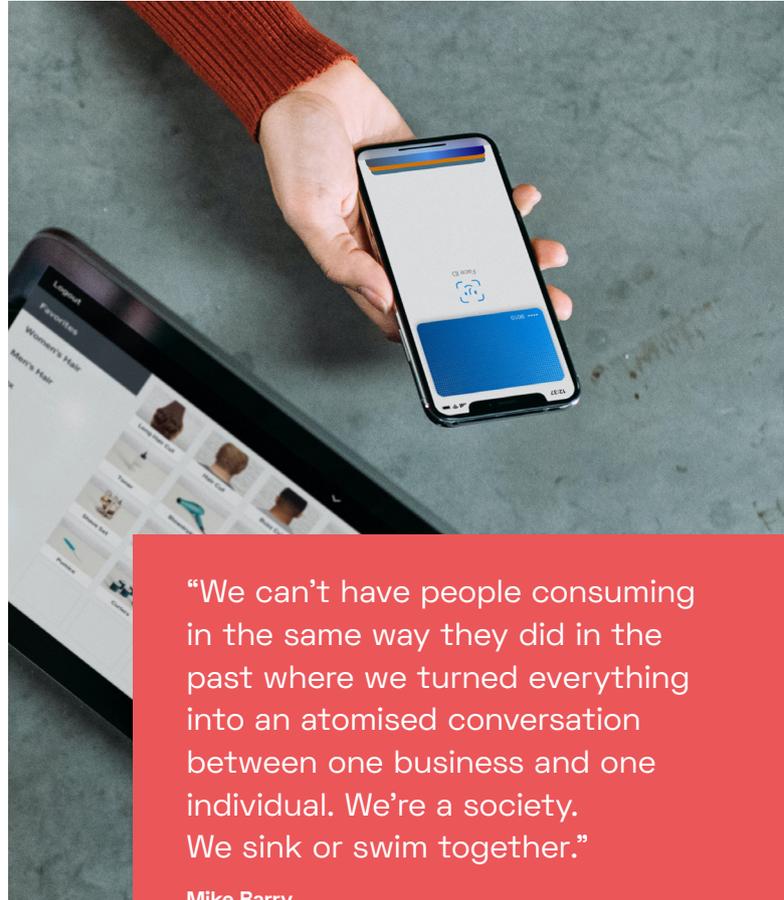
As with all communications, successful sustainability comms is rooted in process, in identifying the right story to tell and then creating and implementing the right plan to get that story to the right audience.

- Educate / train your team and yourself
- Know what your most material impacts are
- Prioritise them
- Put an action plan in place
- Delegate to your teams
- Put SMART targets in place

“Consumers get terms like sustainable and organic but in industry circles we’re talking about things like intersectional environmentalism and accountability so there is a disconnect around language and a challenge in turning it into a compelling narrative”

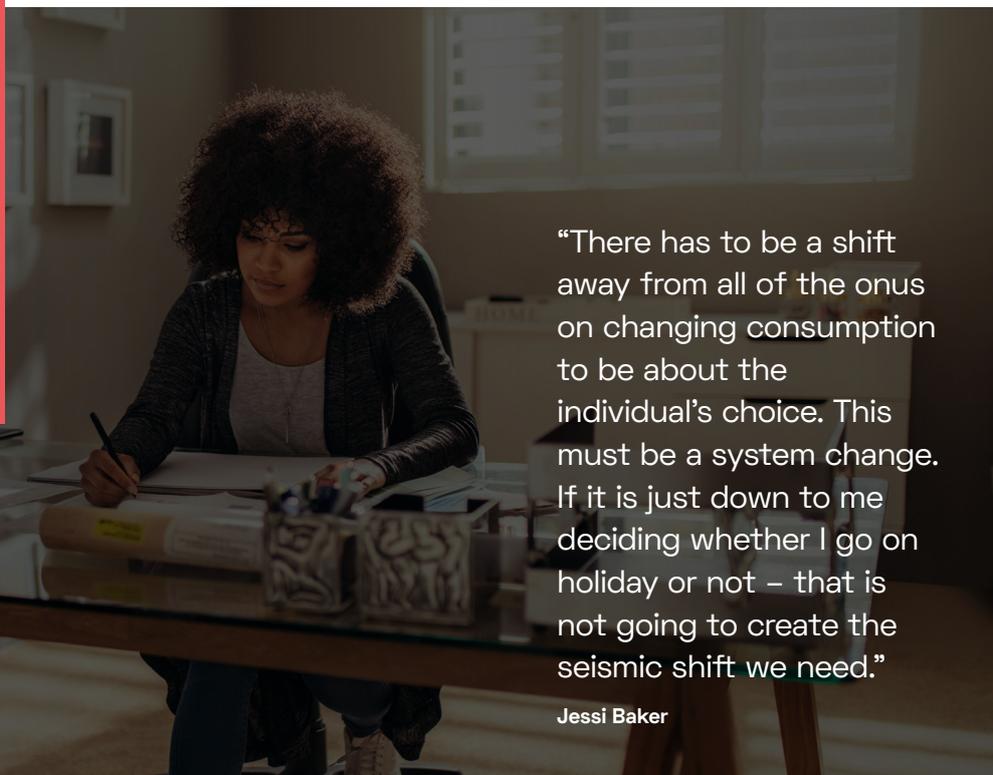
Kellie Dalton

- Track progress over time
- Be transparent about what you are doing and what your challenges are
- Tell the story of how your value chain is involved in helping you reach your goals
- Treat all of them as equal partners



“We can’t have people consuming in the same way they did in the past where we turned everything into an atomised conversation between one business and one individual. We’re a society. We sink or swim together.”

Mike Barry



“There has to be a shift away from all of the onus on changing consumption to be about the individual’s choice. This must be a system change. If it is just down to me deciding whether I go on holiday or not – that is not going to create the seismic shift we need.”

Jessi Baker

# WITH THANKS TO OUR WEBINAR PANEL:



**Jessi Baker**  
Founder & CEO  
[Provenance](#)



**Mike Barry**  
Ex-Director of Sustainable Business  
Marks & Spencer



**Kellie Dalton**  
Sustainability Consultant  
[Nelson Bostock](#)



**Louise Wilson**  
Co-founder and Joint MD  
[Abundance Investment](#)

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## Further resources

1. Listen to the recording of the webinar here: <https://bit.ly/3nGHaNI>
2. Read our full Sustainability Reset report:  
<https://events.nelsonbostock.com/the-sustainability-reset-report>
3. Nelson Bostock offers workshops, audience mapping, insights, storytelling, content strategy around sustainability and purpose. For further information contact: [sinead.oconnor@nelsonbostock.com](mailto:sinead.oconnor@nelsonbostock.com)