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How to Communicate Data Centre Sustainability in an AI-Driven World

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Introduction

Are you telling the right story on AI and sustainability?

Data centres power the digital revolution, but rising energy use and the demands of AI present major challenges.

Surging AI demand is fuelling data centre growth, but it is also intensifying scrutiny of their environmental impact. Companies and consumers alike are asking urgent questions about the sustainability of increasingly energy-hungry facilities.

This leaves technology companies grappling with a PR and communications challenge. Not for the first time, of course, as technology evolves rapidly and the need to educate diverse stakeholders on complex issues is nothing new.

However, sustainability is not the sector's core business. Companies must build thought leadership credentials in light of the green agenda of the day. They must strive to communicate genuine sustainability efforts, and to be relatable, if they are to manage public perception of what they do, and how they do it.

This paper tackles the communications challenge of data centres and sustainability. It outlines how effective PR and communications can support data centre businesses in an evolving sustainability landscape. It highlights the marketing challenges posed by current trends and explores how to address them through strategic communications.

A booming data centre market

There are [almost 12,000 data centres in the world](#)[1]: the U.S. lays claim to over 5,000 of them while Europe has more than 2,500. Of these, Germany and the UK contribute over 500 each, the latter providing [Europe's largest data centre hub](#)[2].

The sector is a growth area. By [one analysis](#)[3], it contributes £4.7 billion annually to the UK economy and generates over 43,000 jobs. Globally, the data centre market is [projected to grow](#) from over USD 269 billion in 2025 to more than USD 584 billion by 2032[4].



Two transformative trends shaping data centre strategies

The data centres sector is at the crossroads of two transformative trends: the explosive growth of AI and the drive for sustainability.

1. The rise of AI

There is cautious optimism about AI around the world. Policy makers, businesses and consumers acknowledge the technology comes with risks, and there are many debates about how to regulate its use, but just as much is said about the diverse benefits it brings.

The UK government wants to make the country an AI superpower. It has promised [AI growth zones](#)[5], complete with faster planning permission to accelerate the delivery of data centre infrastructure.

[AI is credited](#) with much of the data centre industry's forecast growth[6]. As demand for AI technologies rises, so too does the need for more, and bigger, processing and storage centres to provide the power to train and run AI models and execute complex algorithms.

Little wonder, then, that forecasts predict [almost half of all new data centres](#) will be used for AI by 2030[7].



2. The sustainability challenge

Sustainability has become a defining issue for data centres. They consume huge amounts of power to run their servers and guzzle considerable quantities of water in their cooling systems. They generate greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from the fossil fuels they use to generate electricity.

AI compounds the problem as its large-scale models come with massive computational and storage needs that push data centres to new limits.

Consider this: an AI-powered ChatGPT request consumes [almost 10x](#) the power of a Google search[8]. Such is the rise of AI that [Goldman Sachs](#) predicts it will account for around 19% of data centres' power needs by 2028[9].

Data centre sustainability has shifted from an aspiration to an urgent crisis, driven by the voracious appetite centres have for power and water and the waste emissions they generate. The figures paint a stark picture:

Energy	Water	GHG emissions
<p>Data centres consume as much electricity in a year as France — 460 terawatt hours, 1.3% of the world's entire supply[10]</p> <p>Data centre electricity consumption could double by 2026 to 1,000+ terawatt hours[11]</p> <p>Average energy consumption per server rack is expected to rise from 17 kilowatts (kW) to as much as 30 kW by 2027[12]</p> <p>In 2030, data centres worldwide could consume an amount of electricity roughly equivalent to that used by the whole of the EU in 2023[13]</p>	<p>Data centres in the USA consume 1.7 billion litres of water a day[14]</p> <p>This puts the sector in the top ten water consuming industries of the U.S.[15]</p> <p>The average water footprint per GB of internet use for networking is 0.74 litres[16]</p> <p>Water is used directly for cooling but also for electricity generation[17]</p> <p>In 2023, Thames Water threatened to restrict data centres' water if they didn't address consumption[18]</p>	<p>Data centres account for around 1-5% of global GHG emissions.[19] By 2030 end they will equal about 40% of US annual emissions[20]</p> <p>In 2020, data centres and transmission networks accounted for circa 330m tonnes of carbon dioxide (CO₂) equivalent[21]</p> <p>This is forecast to rise to the equivalent of 2.5bn metric tons of CO₂ by 2030 end[22]</p> <p>Global cloud computing emissions exceed those of commercial aviation (around 2.4% global GHG) [23]</p>

Table: data centres' sustainability problem

Statistics like these give data centres an image problem around sustainability, and a backlash is being seen worldwide:

Mesa, Arizona	Chile	Zeewolde, the Netherlands	Dublin, Ireland
<p>When a large new development was approved in 2021, the vice mayor called data centres, “an irresponsible use of our water”[24]</p>	<p>Activist groups have pushed back against a spate of data centre development[25]</p>	<p>A protest was staged[26] at local government offices as councillors voted on a Facebook data centre</p>	<p>Data centre development is on hold until 2028 due to the strain on the electricity grid[27]. A councillor said, “it's time the genuine concerns of people are listened to</p>

Table: a backlash against data centres

How regulation and innovation are responding

Regulatory scrutiny of data centres

Regulation evolves all the time, and varies around the world, but from one region to another data centre companies are having to get to grips with their key performance indicators (KPIs).

The European Union (EU)’s [Energy Efficiency Directive](#) mandates KPI reporting and defines how data centres will be rated moving forward. [28] Meanwhile, the [Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive](#) (CSRD), also from the EU, requires the disclosure of environmental and social impacts, and how actions affect the business.[29]

In the UK, the National Engineering Policy Centre has [called on the Government](#) to mandate reporting on energy and water consumption and carbon emissions, in order to set conditions for data centres. A member of the working group said, “If we cannot measure it, we cannot manage it, nor ensure benefits for all.”[30]

Elsewhere, in Japan the sustainability standards board has [finalised disclosure standards](#) that are intended to form the basis of mandatory reporting requirements.[31]

This is not an exhaustive list. Data centre companies must be constantly vigilant to additional scrutiny and take appropriate steps. However, while compliance is a significant driver of action, they would be unwise to view sustainability as a mere box-ticking exercise.

They can, and should, use regulation as a launchpad for best practice and ensure that sustainability forms a proactive part of the business and communications strategy. After all, effective environmental, social and governance (ESG) policies make sound business and PR sense. They help improve business operations and efficiency and this in turn reassures investors, partners and customers about the company's future resilience.



Data centre innovations

Data centre companies recognise the sustainability challenge they face and have been improving efficiency for years. Novel technologies that reduce energy consumption and environmental impact continually come onstream.

Infrastructure providers have, for example, introduced [greener energy for UK data centres](#)[32] whilst a data centre company in Iceland is [harnessing and redistributing](#)[33] excess heat rather than waste it.

Another innovation data centre providers can deploy is edge data centres, which bring processing closer to users. These smaller centres reduce the load on traditional data centres and, being located close to the edge of a network, consume less energy in data transmission.

As we've seen, AI contributes to the sustainability problem, but it can also be part of the solution. It can, for example, [optimise energy use in real-time](#) to reduce wastage and improve performance. Google applied the AI tool DeepMind to its own data centres and cut energy use for cooling by 40% [34]

In an [Accenture study](#), most business leaders were optimistic about AI's impact on emissions globally — 42% expect it to reduce them in the short-term (1- 3 years) while only 27% expect the opposite. Long-term (10+ years), 65% expect AI to reduce emissions [35].

The data centre marketing challenge

Considering their environmental impact, it is hardly surprising that [Gartner predicts](#) 75% of companies will have a sustainability strategy for their data centres by 2027 [36]

As they develop and execute these strategies, they must also tell a stronger sustainability story. It's not just about environmental responsibility anymore — it's about credibility, trust and each company's long-term survival.

The audience is varied. It comprises the enterprise customers who buy data centre space, as well as investors, regulators, campaigners, the media and the general public. Each group will have varying levels of awareness and knowledge, as well as their own vested interests, that marketers and communicators must take into account when crafting sustainability messaging.



Communicating sustainability

Data centre marketers find themselves caught in the middle of conflicting priorities — the public is driving an insatiable demand for power-hungry AI applications but are also, along with regulators, calling for greener data centres.

Yes, data centre companies are duty-bound to comply with sustainability measurement and reporting and are rolling out new technologies to improve KPIs. But without clear messaging, even the best efforts can go unnoticed or, worse still, be dismissed as greenwashing.

And greenwashing isn't just about exaggerating, it's also an overreliance on vague, technical, or empty language. If sustainability messaging is filled with jargon or buzzwords but lacks substance, you can expect criticism.

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However, silence on sustainability is not a strategy. Data companies that fail to engage leave a void just waiting to be filled by speculation, criticism or competitors who will step up and take control of the narrative.

But vague promises or overblown claims will also backfire in a market that's more sceptical than ever. Investors, customers and regulators value hard data, clear targets and full transparency over a series of feel-good statements about sustainability.

Finally, marketers and communicators must contend with messaging fatigue. Sustainability has become a core part of corporate branding over the years, but in a crowded market every tech company claims to be green, so it's harder than ever to stand out. The brands that own the conversation will set the standard. The ones that don't will get left behind.



PR insight: credible audience-based sustainability messaging

Sustainability messaging must demonstrate measurable impact. The challenges are there for everyone to see and read about, so it's unlikely your audiences expect perfection. But ignoring sustainability challenges raises possible red flags and will leave them with unanswered questions. Instead, your messaging should acknowledge the hurdles and show a realistic plan to overcome them. This is a credible approach that helps build trust.

Marketers must develop clear, authentic narratives that highlight concrete sustainability actions, regulatory compliance and long-term commitments to reducing carbon footprint. Transparent communication is key to building and maintaining public trust.

Claiming to be 'committed' to sustainability and green technology is nice, but it becomes [meaningless](#) without evidence[37]. Instead, use real numbers, set clear targets and show both the wins and the work still to be done.

You should frame sustainability efforts to highlight real-world impact and provide proof-points along the way. That means backing up claims with data, showcasing progress and addressing challenges head-on.

To manage complexity, marketers of data centres and providers of component systems such as those involved in cooling systems, should demystify AI and edge computing for a broad audience. Break down complex initiatives into digestible, meaningful content that different audiences can connect with.

By translating technical data into business benefits, marketers can help their audiences better understand how energy efficiency lowers costs for customers or how cooling technology can reduce strain on the grid. These are the kinds of details that resonate.

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Each audience has its own characteristics, reasons for you to communicate with them and particular information needs, such as:

Audience	Who?	Why?	What?
Customers	Enterprises buying data centre space	Sustainability is integral to their own strategies. Their suppliers' impact on the environment forms part of their value chain	Sustainability challenges Targets and actions Regulatory compliance Long-term strategy Investment in innovation Success stories
Investors	Individuals, corporations, venture capitalists, shareholders	Sustainability impacts commercial viability and resilience which impacts revenue and profit	Sustainability challenges Metrics, targets and actions Regulatory compliance Long-term strategy Investment in innovation Value generation
Regulators	Government and regulatory agencies	Regulation mandates specified sustainability reporting	Sustainability metrics Targets and actions
Campaigners	Sustainability advocates	As ambassadors for sustainable practices, they have influence in the media and society	Sustainability challenges Targets and actions Long-term strategy Investment in innovation Success stories
The Media	International, national, regional and trade media	Sustainability is a topic of interest to specialist and generalist media	A tailored PR strategy that provides information of value to each channel's audience, builds positive media relationships and serves the wider marketing and business objectives
The General Public	Consumers	Sustainability is a global issue	Sustainability challenges Actions, successes and long-term strategy Investment in innovation

A five-pronged data centre sustainability PR strategy

An experienced PR agency can guide you through sustainability communications challenges by:

1. Crafting simplified messaging

Breaking down complex technologies into understandable, compelling stories that resonate with diverse stakeholders, using clear, relatable messages that demystify AI and edge computing, highlighting their benefits and real-world applications without overwhelming with technical jargon.

2. Building thought leadership

Establishing the company as a leader in both sustainability and AI by creating insightful content, participating in industry discussions and securing media coverage.

3. Managing reputation and perception

Developing a transparent narrative that highlights genuine efforts towards sustainability, avoiding accusations of greenwashing, and demonstrating a commitment to real, measurable environmental impact.

4. Media liaison and storytelling

Using media relations to tell impactful stories about how the company addresses sustainability and AI trends effectively, reinforcing its reputation as a forward-thinking and responsible player in the industry.

5. Being ready for crisis communications

In the event of an environmental incident or backlash over energy usage and emissions, having a robust crisis communication plan is vital. Quick, transparent and empathetic responses are crucial. Crisis communication strategies must include clear messaging, rapid response protocols and a plan for engaging with stakeholders and the media to maintain trust and minimise reputational damage. An expert PR team can help with this.

Conclusion

Data centre providers cannot afford to stay silent on sustainability, but knowing what to say, and how to say it, is just as important as acting. The brands that can communicate their progress with confidence, meaning and clarity will be well-placed to lead the conversation. The rest will be rushing to react when their story is written by someone else.

By adopting the right strategy and messaging, data centre operators can mitigate the PR risks associated with high energy consumption and position themselves as leaders in sustainability within the industry.

PR teams with proven experience in this ecosystem can help build a strong sustainability story that stands up to scrutiny and captures attention. With defined and consistent messaging and impactful narratives, they can deliver communications that convey sustainability efforts and stand out.

“Brands that can communicate their progress with confidence, meaning and clarity will be well-placed to lead the conversation”

FINN Partners specialises in creating impactful announcements that capture attention and achieve communication goals. Get in touch through finnpartners.com/uk to explore how we can support your public relations needs.

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Founded in 2011 on the core principles of innovation and collaborative partnership, FINN Partners has grown from about \$24 million in fees to nearly \$200 million in fees over ten years, becoming one of the fastest growing independent public relations agencies in the world.

The full-service marketing and communications company's record setting pace is a result of organic growth and integrating new companies and new people into the FINN world through a common philosophy.

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