

Right now. For tomorrow: Launching a purpose-driven sustainability brand

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Howard Breindel has a long-standing track record of building businesses that draw on his expertise in branding, marketing and technology. He began his career at Grey Global Group, as the co-founder of an innovative communications technology company. Howard led the firm's rapid growth among Fortune 500 companies, establishing it as an internationally recognised leader in C-Suite corporate and investor communications. Later, Howard pioneered interactive multimedia and internet communications for many of the largest global financial services, healthcare and media companies and built the firm into one of Grey's most profitable subsidiaries. Howard was also a co-founder of Directors Desk, a revolutionary digital communications platform for boards of directors of public corporations, which was bought by NASDAQ in 2007. Today, as Co-CEO of DeSantis Breindel, Howard helps visionary leaders in financial services, technology, professional services and healthcare transform their brands into powerful competitive assets.

Abstract

Although corporate sustainability campaigns are common, rarely do brands begin with ecological concerns, rooting their identity in a pre-existing commitment to protecting our planet. ENGIE, a multinational energy and services company, sets such a project in motion in 2019, establishing a one-of-its-kind company that combined existing data and execution capabilities with consulting and analytics in order to facilitate a quicker transition to a carbon-neutral economy. Translating this driving purpose into a full brand positioning, messaging, company name, visual identity, website and launch strategy, the resulting brand, ENGIE Impact, quickly established the business as a thought leader and trusted partner in a new and vital space. As such, a comprehensive ENGIE Impact case study provides marketers and strategists with a blueprint for launching purpose-driven business-to-business (B2B) brands.

Keywords

corporate social responsibility, sustainability transformation, brand naming, brand launch, energy and utilities, B2B branding

INTRODUCTION

Typically, when marketers talk about aligning of brand and sustainability, they are thinking from the brand down, about cascading a company's essence into its corporate social responsibility (CSR) messaging in an authentic way. In other words, the phrase refers to the kind of campaigns that explain why a technology company is working towards carbon neutral or why a consultancy is partnering with a climate research institute. Less frequently do we get the chance to work from sustainability

up, building a brand and its messaging from a pre-existing commitment to protecting our planet.

ENGIE, a multinational energy and services company, sets such a project in motion in 2019. It decided the time was right to realise a dream its leaders felt passionate about: the establishment of a one-of-its-kind company that could combine existing data and execution capabilities with consulting and analytics in order to facilitate a quicker transition to a carbon-neutral economy.

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THE CASE FOR CHANGE

Over the past few decades, we have witnessed shifts such as globalisation and digitisation that have profoundly changed the way corporations operate. ENGIE believes a new type of transformation is under way: a sustainability transformation. Customers, investors and governments are demanding that corporations do their part to protect the planet. Technology is making renewables and their management more affordable and sustainable. New business models are allowing corporations to reimagine how they generate, use and monetise resources.

These new market and regulatory realities align with ENGIE's organisational principles. This was a company whose leadership and employees are deeply concerned about global climate change and who believe large companies have a responsibility to mitigate its destructive impacts.

For ENGIE, this responsibility meant rethinking every area of its business and operations. The company divested from legacy energy assets and shifted towards renewables. It is investing €12bn between 2019 and 2021 in the energy transition and has installed 31 GW of renewable power, as well as establishing itself as a market leader in growth areas such as microgrids and electric vehicles.

But ENGIE was also troubled by how it saw some companies approaching environmental sustainability. Too frequently, it seemed like companies engaged in 'greenwashing', which management scholars Frances Bowen and J. Alberto Aragon-Correa describe as 'increased environmental disclosure without obvious substantive improvements in environmental impacts'.¹ For example, more than 900 of the world's largest companies had signed the Paris Accord, but only 94 were on track to meet their climate reduction goals.²

ENGIE knew not only that greenwashing was an infeasible option for the planet, but also that the decreasing cost of sustainability initiatives empowered more firms to genuinely embrace them. With this in mind, ENGIE saw an opportunity for it to leverage its existing operational scale with consulting and analytics in order to help large clients transform their organisations to be prepared for, and to contribute to, a more climate-sensitive business environment. Its addressable market was large and growing. At the time of brand development, 155 corporations had joined RE100, committing to move to 100 per cent renewable electricity.³ The sustainability consulting market, however, was fragmented, with few companies that could provide the end-to-end solutions or global scale desired by enterprises. ENGIE was well-positioned to fill this role; because of its resources and expertise, it was a true sustainability transformation company, the first of its kind.

Although ENGIE had all of the requisite pieces of a sustainability transformation offer, they were not packaged in a way that communicated their holistic value for global clients or for employees. The advising, data and technical strengths of sub-brands ENGIE Insight, Tractebel, Red Engineering and Ecova UK were largely separated from one another. This new brand would bring the four business units together, unifying not only its market presence, but also its employees and operations. What is more, it would build equity in a single name, something that would be important as the company continued its expansion outside of the US, where it was already a market leader in the field.

Everything was lining up: the company had purpose, demand and capabilities. But with a tight timeline before the scheduled launch of the new business, it was missing three important ingredients: a name, a brand platform and a visual identity.

STARTING FROM PURPOSE

ENGIE convened a global summit of its executives and sustainability transformation leaders in New York. With the company's typical efficiency, they immediately set to work on articulating the new brand alongside agency partner DeSantis Breindel. The leaders knew their business strategy was sound, but when it came to brand, the only thing certain was that it must capture the purpose driving its creation.

Brand strategists often quip that when you ask ten employees about their company's purpose, you are liable to get ten different answers. This disunity is unfortunately common, especially in large enterprises, and is usually one of the reasons the business has turned to a branding agency for guidance. ENGIE was different. Almost without exception, the workshop participants — who came from four subsidiaries and three countries (several of whom were meeting one another for the first time in person) — could identify what fuelled the new company: a belief that the future depended on the kind of transformation it could steward.

Thus, NewCo's brand idea was clear from the outset. Leadership quickly approved the phrase that would come to define the company: *Right now. For tomorrow.* The essence — which doubled as a tagline — captured the urgency and gravity with which ENGIE saw its mission and promised to serve as a rallying cry for employees and a call to action for potential clients.

ENGIE's crystal-clear driving force meant the team was starting where most companies aim to end. In other words, often the challenge before brand strategists is to uncover a higher-level purpose that can unite common sense, dollars-and-cents messages. ENGIE had the intangible rallying cry that so many search for. It needed, however, to select the

tangible supporting messages that would explain why it was the right company to pioneer sustainability transformation. In a move fitting for a first-in-its-class business, ENGIE's NewCo had flipped the script on the branding process.

Workshops, interviews and discussions between the business units served to uncover the common elements that defined the combined company's value proposition. Infused with the brand's essence, these characteristics would become the essential components of the new business unit's communications strategy. Workshop exercises and group discussions uncovered the following strengths that set ENGIE NewCo apart:

- **Data analytics:** *We have a large set of resource data that allows us to benchmark our clients and help understand their portfolio, but we also have analytics that leverage data science and engineering principles to allow us to proactively extract value.*
- **Collective expertise:** *The collective intelligence of our people is our strength, without which we would not exist.*
- **Tailored services:** *Cities like New York, Melbourne and Brussels do not have the same needs, nor do a hotel and an office building — and so we would not suggest the same solutions.*
- **Trusted advice:** *We are not just recommending ENGIE services and solutions. If alternatives exist that are a better fit for our clients, we default to what is good for the client before what is good for the group.*
- **Global scale:** *ENGIE NewCo is an integral business unit within ENGIE, a massive global player leading the energy transition with complementary solutions to help drive tangible results.*
- **Value creation:** *We are creating a new kind of consultancy category ... bringing about a revolution in how organisations manage and consume resources.*

In keeping with its belief in its collective expertise, ENGIE NewCo knew that its greatest brand ambassador would be its people. As such, it worked to ensure that employees at all levels felt empowered to describe the brand and its value proposition. To weave individual strengths into a cohesive narrative, company representatives answered the questions: *what do we do, how do we do it and why do we do it*. Synthesised, these pillars created a pithy statement that employees could use to describe their work to prospects and friends:

We take on complex sustainability challenges across your organisation by harnessing the depth of our data and the power of our people to propel corporations, cities and governments towards a better tomorrow — starting today.

NAMING NEWCO

ENGIE NewCo had come a long way: from a collection of dispersed businesses united primarily by an urgent purpose, it had identified the tangible shared strengths that would bring its mission to the marketplace. It was time to develop the all-important brand name. Names in this space run the gamut from the highly functional to the highly evocative, from Schneider Electric to SolarEdge. Where along this spectrum did NewCo need to be? Recognising that the global network offered by ENGIE represented one of the new company's foundational strengths, the group decided that it was important to retain explicit affiliation with the ENGIE brand, or, in other words, to remain an ENGIE sub-brand.

Nonetheless, the spirit and purpose evinced by NewCo were so significant that the brand team knew it deserved a unique and evocative nomenclature element. It turned to similarly positioned sub-brands

for inspiration, such as one of its predecessors, ENGIE Insight. These are sub-brands for which the master brand is the driver. In other words, the parent company is the primary reference, but the sub-brand adds differentiating associations, such as novelty, personality or a specific target audience. This strategy was a good fit for NewCo's game-changing business.

Naming specialists generated options that captured the new brand's purpose. Finalists were screened for global appropriateness: were they inadvertently communicating something in another language? Were they easily pronounced in all of NewCo's markets? In the end, the group gravitated towards an option that was simple but effective: ENGIE Impact. It not only reflected the change and outcome the organisation aimed to deliver, but also complemented the other sub-brands across ENGIE. Additionally, because of the word impact's Latin origins, the word was broadly familiar to speakers of many languages.

AUTHENTICITY ABOVE ALL

Because ENGIE still served as the 'master brand', its visual identity could largely be extended to the ENGIE Impact brand. Both the internal team and DeSantis Breindel, however, were adamant about total authenticity in its photography, which would be the primary visual brand element. This would be a subtle but important indicator that ENGIE Impact was serious about its mission. Competitive audits had revealed that photography in the category — both gestural and descriptive — was often wildly inaccurate or out of date. These mistakes highlighted the discrepancies between these companies' words and actions. ENGIE Impact did not want its genuine commitment put in question by sloppy image selection, so it went to work formulating a plan to ensure its photography was accurate.

In addition to the careful vetting of imagery's appropriateness, the brand team crafted guidelines for ensuring photographs were also on-brand, reflecting ENGIE Impact's character and purpose. These encouraged unusual angles, super-human perspectives, global representation and intersections of society and nature. When featured, humans were to be in situ, rather than posed, further driving home the brand's authenticity.

Other graphic elements included a proprietary illustration style that borrowed from the parent brand's signature cyan-teal gradient. This design vernacular was translated into a large iconography bank whose illustrations and icons gave brand communicators greater visual flexibility, allowing them to vary the look of materials as well as use icons as anchoring, wayfinding elements, particularly on the web. They would be particularly useful for print and web infographics, which the brand anticipated using frequently to explain the importance of its challenge and the wide scope of its reach and solutions.

AN IMPACTFUL LAUNCH

ENGIE Impact selected Climate Week 2019 as its venue for announcing its name and brand. Climate Week, held annually in New York City, is the world's largest climate action summit for an audience of business, civic and government leaders. As such, it was the perfect venue for ENGIE Impact to introduce itself to the C-suite level decision-makers it was trying to reach.

Isabelle Kocher, ENGIE CEO at the time, served as a keynote speaker for the event, with other ENGIE Impact-sponsored events scattered throughout the week, including the ongoing sponsorship of the summit's streaming platform, an article from ENGIE Impact CEO Mathias Lelievre and several other speaking engagements. These

events, as well as an official launch video and PR plan, spurred media pickup from *Bloomberg* and industry publications such as *Energy + Environment Leader*, *Waste360* and *Hydrocarbon Engineering*.

The launch and subsequent media coverage led to an immediate surge of interest in the new brand from prospects and employees alike. ENGIE Impact's social media posts during Climate Week received more than 16 million impressions, and the brand's internal resource site experienced a 347 per cent traffic increase. Launch communications worked to funnel interested parties to an ENGIE Impact microsite, which approachably condensed important brand information and messages alongside the visual system and its trademark sweeping images.

LEADING A NEW CATEGORY

In the following weeks, ENGIE Impact leveraged launch excitement into more than 100 C-level client meetings and seven subsequent speaking opportunities. Internal interest continued apace; leaders reported a fourfold increase in employee engagement following the brand's launch. These and other interactions provided valuable prospect and user feedback, which informed work as the launch microsite was expanded into a full corporate online presence.

'Once our executive team and stakeholders deeply aligned that we would put purpose at the core of our brand, everything else fell into place to create positive disruption,' said Michael Kaplan, chief marketing officer of ENGIE Impact.

Our messaging, visuals, and voice all combined to resonate with a marketplace that is not only looking for bold partners, but one that can drive the economic and environmental results we need.

More than a year on, ENGIE Impact's efforts to establish its sustainability consulting leadership are paying dividends. The company has become a go-to media contact for commentary on sustainability transformation issues and expanded its sponsorship of (virtual) Climate Week 2020. It continues to grow its client roster and now partners with more than 25 per cent of the Fortune 500. Additionally, ENGIE Impact recently celebrated its expansion into the Asia-Pacific (APAC) market, especially notable in a year that Chinese President Xi Jinping pledged to achieve carbon neutrality by 2060.

A SUSTAINABLE BRAND FOR SUSTAINABILITY TRANSFORMATION

Although ENGIE Impact was uniquely united in mission, the company illustrates the overall benefits of purpose-led branding. ENGIE Impact's foundation in the urgency of its work led strategists to identify the most compelling strengths to emphasise, while also leaving the brand flexible enough to adapt to changing operational and market realities. With its emphasis on photography and its deep

bank of proprietary icons and illustrations, ENGIE Impact's visual system compounded this brand flexibility. This simple system made collateral creation easier for employees, empowering everyone to produce on-brand communications. Together, these visual and verbal elements represented an important feat: a sustainable brand for a sustainability transformation consultancy. It is a corporate identity grounded in authentic purpose but agile enough to flex for its contexts and users, ensuring its relevance for years to come so that ENGIE Impact can focus on changing the world — instead of changing its brand.

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