

Jargon Buster!

A no-nonsense guide to words and terms people use when talking about sustainability.

Sustainability The simple understanding that everything we depend on for our survival and well-being in turn depends on the well-being of the natural environment. For business, the term refers to how the health and stability of business relies on the asset base of the natural world, not the other way around. Sustainability is therefore about creating and maintaining the conditions for environmental, social and economic prosperity without compromising the ability of future generations to do the same.

Sustainable A product, process or way of being which can be sustained in the long term because it does not erode the natural, social and economic support systems upon which it relies.

Bio-Degradable A material which can be broken down over time by naturally occurring micro-organisms & bacteria into natural compounds. But do not be fooled into thinking bio-degradable always equals sustainable.

Compostable A material which will breakdown under specific composting conditions into produce a nutrient rich compost.

EN 1342 The European compostability standard which states that all certified packaging can be industrially composted within 8-12 weeks (i.e. at the same rate as paper), producing compost with the right nutrient value for land use.

Closed Loop A new way of producing and using products so there is no waste. A closed loop product is never fully exhausted upon its first use. Rather than throwing it away in a 'take-make-waste' fashion, the product is designed to be recaptured and recycled into either the same product, or for another purpose in a continuous loop. Examples include newspapers being recycled back into newspapers, steel remanufactured back into various car parts, or bagasse packaging turned into compost. Remember, the loop is continuous, so if you recycle a product only once before throwing it away, it is not a closed loop.

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End of Life Solution An option(s) for a product to be recycled/remanufactured into something else so it has a second, third, fourth etc... life and is not wasted.

Renewable A natural resource or source of energy (wind, water, solar) which can be continuously renewed or replaced by natural cycles or good management practices.

Sugar Cane Bagasse The dry pulp which is left over after the sugarcane has been crushed to extract the juices. The material can be used for bio-fuel or spun into building or packaging material.

Carbon Footprint An internationally recognised metric which calculates how much CO2 is produced during the manufacture, use and disposal of a product. It is a useful tool for benchmarking the environmental impact of alternative products. However, it is important to know that the value of calculating this footprint totally depends on where you draw the boundary to begin counting CO2 and where to stop. E.g. for compostable packaging, do you start counting the CO2 produced at the very beginning of the supply chain when the crops are grown, or do you only start the count once manufacturing begins? Where this boundary is drawn can dramatically affect the results and give a misleading footprint.

PLA Is an acronym for Poly Lactic Acid which is the polymer extracted from starch found in common crops and plants to make a compostable resin. The most commonly used raw material for this process is Corn Starch. Others include potato starch, soybean protein and cellulose.

Eco-Friendly This term is frequently used to refer to a product or process' positive environmental benefit. However, this term is highly subjective and tends to only refer to one environmental aspect of the product/process rather than the whole picture. For example, a manufacturer for a recyclable coffee cup might call the product 'eco-friendly' because it can be recycled rather than buried in landfill. But if the product also has a high CO2 footprint is it still 'eco-friendly'? Because this term is so open to interpretation and manipulation, it can be associated with 'green washing'.

Green Washing Misleading environmental facts.

Waste Management The processes involved in dealing with the waste of humans and organisms, including minimization, handling, processing, storage, recycling, transport and final disposal.

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