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Building the future of sustainable e-commerce in the agri-food sector: insights from the ECO-merce Project

Sustainability has become an important market and operational consideration in the production and marketing of agri-food products. Agri-food producers and SMEs are increasingly expected to explain how their products reflect environmental, social and ethical responsibility. Many agri-food actors already address these sustainability dimensions through production methods, sourcing relationships, packaging, working conditions, and community engagement. At the same time, e-commerce is changing how these practices are presented and understood by using digital touchpoints. Rather than speaking directly with a producer or seeing how a product is made, customers often rely on a product page, a label, a short description or a social media post.

This reliance on limited digital touchpoints makes it challenging for agri-food businesses to communicate sustainability clearly, credibly, and in a commercially realistic way. Agri-food businesses need to make their sustainability efforts visible online without oversimplifying them, overstating their impact or undermining their commercial appeal. Too little information can leave meaningful practices unnoticed, while excessive technical detail can make sustainability information difficult for consumers to interpret. Broad, unclear or poorly supported claims can also erode trust and raise concerns about greenwashing. Effective online communication requires translating operational practices and supporting evidence into product information that is both accessible and credible.

The ECO-merce project - *Embedding Sustainable Marketing in e-commerce for Agri-food* supports agri-food actors in building the practical capabilities to align their sustainability practices with credible online communication.

Drawing on evidence from agri-food actors and consumers, the project translates identified sector needs into relevant learning opportunities, practical guidance and targeted support for the responsible use of digital technologies and sustainable e-commerce.

What is holding agri-food actors back?

To identify where support is most needed, the ECO-merce partnership drew on focus groups, a producer survey, follow-up interviews and consumer research. Across these sources, agri-food actors recognised the importance of sustainable marketing, but practical constraints often prevent them from applying it systematically.

Limited organisational capacity. Many businesses lack the time, staff and specialist expertise needed to collect evidence, develop digital content and maintain sustainability communication across online channels.

Gaps in evidence and regulatory knowledge. Credible sustainability claims depend on reliable data, monitoring processes and an understanding of product information and labelling requirements. Many actors do not yet have all these foundations in place.

Pressure to remain visible online. Smaller producers must compete on crowded digital platforms while ensuring that their product information is complete, accessible and easy for consumers to understand.

Operational trade-offs. Packaging and delivery decisions often require businesses to balance environmental ambitions with cost, product protection, customer expectations and the realities of small-scale distribution. These choices also influence whether sustainability messages remain convincing throughout the customer experience.

New demands created by digital tools. Digital marketing and AI-supported content creation can improve reach and efficiency, but they also raise concerns about privacy, cybersecurity, content accuracy and responsible use.

These pressures can make businesses hesitant to communicate their sustainability efforts. Some may say too little because they are concerned about overstating their achievements or being accused of greenwashing. Others may highlight isolated actions without showing how sustainability is connected across their products, operations and organisational values.

The sector is asking for practical skills

When agri-food actors were asked which capabilities they most needed to strengthen, the most prominent skill needs were as follows:

1. Using artificial intelligence responsibly for marketing.
2. Working with online platforms and improving digital visibility.
3. Measuring and tracking sustainability performance.
4. Avoiding greenwashing.
5. Writing clear and trustworthy sustainability messages.
6. Reducing the environmental impact of digital marketing.
7. Making informed digital and operational decisions.
8. Understanding rules concerning product information, labels and sustainability claims.

Agri-food actors also express clear preferences for **how these capabilities should be developed**:

- ✓ **96%** (approximately) agreed that training should be adapted to different professional roles.
- ✓ **90%** (around) preferred short, practical training to longer courses.
- ✓ **84%** valued examples, templates and step-by-step checklists that could be used in everyday work.

What sustainability means to different consumers

Sustainability does not influence every purchasing decision in the same way. To better understand these differences, ECO-merce explored the values that shape how consumers choose agri-food products. Drawing on responses from 133 consumers across nine European countries, the project developed five consumer personas: the Sustainability Champion, Conscious Chooser, Pragmatic Balancer, Convenience Seeker, and Unengaged Consumer.

SUSTAINABILITY CHAMPION



Sustainability Champions actively look for responsible products. They pay attention to labels, this group, detailed and credible evidence can strengthen confidence in a product or brand.

CONSCIOUS CHOOSER



Conscious Choosers also care strongly about sustainability but balance it with price and convenience. They are more likely to select a sustainable option when the information is visible, clear and easy to understand.

PRAGMATIC BALANCER



Pragmatic Balancers are moderately interested in sustainability. Sustainable options are more likely to appeal to them when they are affordable, accessible and connected to practical benefits.

CONVENIENCE SEEKER



Convenience Seekers prioritise factors such as price, taste and ease of purchase. Sustainability is more relevant to this group when it is connected to a direct benefit, such as quality, health, convenience or a promotional offer.

UNENGAGED CONSUMER



Unengaged Consumers are influenced primarily by price, habit and brand familiarity. Sustainability messages alone may have little effect on their purchasing decisions.

These personas show that consumers do not interpret sustainability in the same way. A single sustainability message is unlikely to work for every customer. Businesses need to understand which values matter to their target audience and adapt how information is presented. A detailed explanation of environmental performance may engage one consumer, while another may respond more strongly to affordability, local value, health, product quality or convenience.

Turning research into skills for sustainable marketing in e-commerce

Understanding the needs of agri-food businesses and the values that influence consumer choices is only useful if it leads to practical actions. The **ECO-merce Skills Framework** facilitates this by connecting producer needs with the values and behaviours outlined in consumer personas. It translates sustainability, marketing, and digital competences into seven practical skill areas :

- ❖ Responsible Communication and Stakeholder Engagement
- ❖ Sustainable Information and Evidence Management
- ❖ Digital Content and Transparent Value Communication
- ❖ Responsible and Sustainable Use of AI and Digital Technologies
- ❖ Sustainable Operations and Decision Making
- ❖ Collaborative Sustainable Value Chains
- ❖ Innovation and Continuous Capability Development

These skill areas are developed and applied at different levels. Some can be strengthened by **individuals** in their everyday work; for example, a marketing employee may learn to communicate information about product origin and sustainability more clearly. Others require **organisational** processes, including collecting evidence, approving claims and coordinating decisions across teams. At the wider **ecosystem** level, collaboration with suppliers, customers, platforms and other partners helps ensure that the sustainability promises made to consumers are supported throughout the value chain.

What comes next?

Looking ahead, ECO-merce will move from identifying sector needs to developing practical learning **Modules** on sustainable marketing and e-commerce, delivered through the **ECO-merce Academy** for agri-food actors, educators and trainers. **Training-of-trainers (ToT)** activities will support educators and facilitators in adapting the materials to different target groups, while **Pilot** activities with agri-food actors will enable the partnership to test, refine and strengthen the learning experience. **Co-creation**, **Practical Roadmaps**, and **Peer-learning** dialogues will further support agri-food stakeholders in assessing their current practices, identifying priority areas for improvement, and planning realistic steps towards more sustainable marketing and e-commerce.

Join the ECO-merce community

Building credible and effective sustainable marketing practices requires contributions from across the agri-food sector. Producers, SMEs, cooperatives, educators, trainers, advisers and sector organisations can support the project by following its progress, sharing their experiences and participating in future activities.

We invite you to:

- ⇒ Follow the [ECO-merce website](#) and [LinkedIn page](#).
- ⇒ Subscribe to [the project newsletter](#).
- ⇒ Join future workshops and peer-learning activities.
- ⇒ Participate in the ECO-merce piloting programme.
- ⇒ Follow the development of the ECO-merce Academy, training modules and practical roadmaps.

As the project moves forward, ECO-merce will continue connecting consumer expectations with the practical capabilities of agri-food actors. By helping businesses communicate sustainability transparently, use digital technologies responsibly and align marketing messages with real practices, the project aims to support a more credible, competitive and sustainable future for agri-food e-commerce.

References :

[SKILLS NEEDS ANALYSIS REPORT](#)

[COMPETENCE LIST](#)

[CONSUMER PERSONA CARDS AND VALUE MAP SUMMARY REPORT](#)

[ECO-MERCE SKILLS FRAMEWORK](#)