



LEVERAGING THE GOLDEN AGE OF EARNED:

3 Reasons Why PR is Essential in the Era of AI

*How savvy green companies can secure consumer trust,
future-proof their reputation, and rise above the
advertising noise with the power of earned media tactics.*



SUSTAINABLE PR
Public relations for a green planet

“You cannot advertise your way out of a crisis. What leaders pay a premium for today is human intelligence, ethical guidance, and the ability to build trust in a fragmented world.”

-World Communications Forum Association

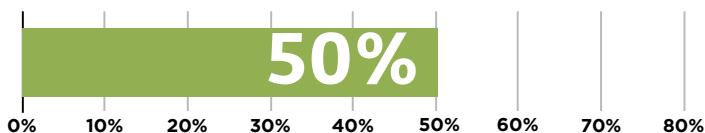
Earned media has always been the verifiable authority in the media landscape; the independent third party an audience turns to when assessing whether a brand is worth their trust.

But with the proliferation of AI-generated content and corresponding rise of audience skepticism, authority has eclipsed the status of “nice to have,” becoming the key to securing both trust and attention.

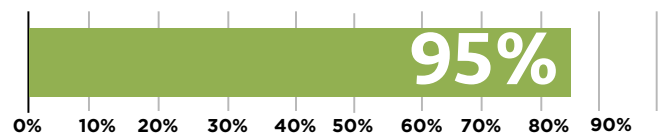
In the age of AI, credibility is the new visibility.

For sustainability companies that have always understood the importance of transparency and credibility — but wrangled with what to disclose, to whom, when, and how much — **the golden age of earned media presents the perfect opportunity to finally get it right.**

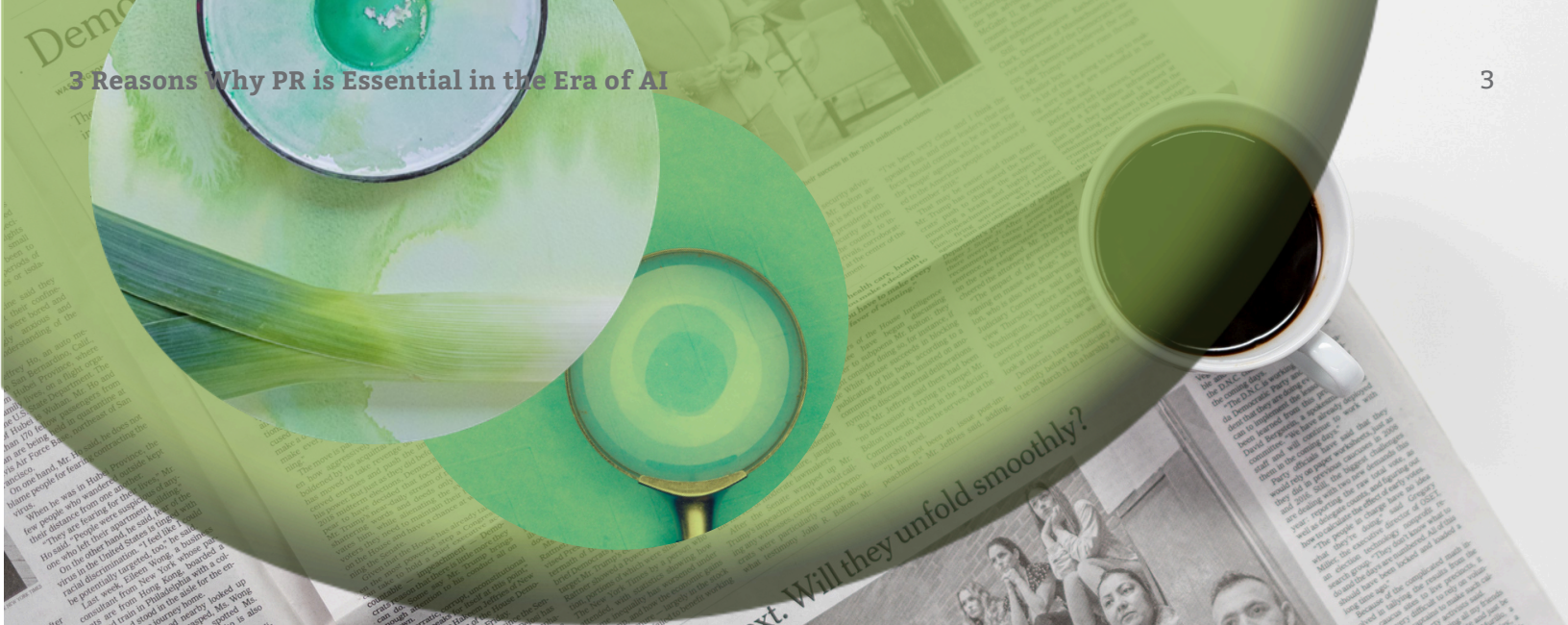
AI IS ALTERING DIGITAL VISIBILITY



50% of consumers now use **AI-powered searches**. Brands unprepared for this shift may experience a decline in traffic from the traditional search channels of anywhere from 20 to 50 percent.



95% of links cited in AI responses come from non-paid sources, with 85% of those earned media, according to a Muck Rack **study**.



3 REASONS WHY PR IS THE MOST ESSENTIAL TOOL FOR GREEN COMPANIES IN THE AGE OF AI

1. AI Prioritizes Earned Media

Digital visibility used to be a matter of gaming the Google search, optimizing your SEO and sprinkling backlink breadcrumbs to entice the search engine crawlers.

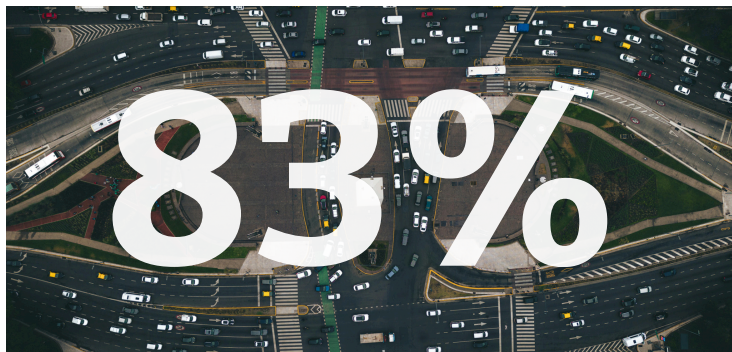
Now, **digital visibility is also a matter of gaming AI.**

Half of consumers use AI-powered searches, with AI search traffic **predicted to surpass** traditional search traffic by 2028. When users pose a question to AI, they don't skim a list of links or poke around different pages. Instead, they're served a synthesized answer drawing from three to five reputable sources. If your brand isn't among them, you simply don't exist in that response. The chances a consumer stumbles across your brand drops dramatically.

As consumers flock to AI, AI turns to earned media. A 2025 **analysis** by Muck Rack, a media monitoring and communications platform, found that **AI responses predominantly link to earned media sources**, prioritizing recognized publications, expert commentary, and well-structured press releases: **To AI, earned media is a signal of trust and authority.**

Both GEO (Generative Engine Optimization) and SEO prioritize earned media, compounding your visibility across every search platform. SEO expert Joy Hawkins

tested the **impact of press releases on SEO performance**: A well-structured release resulted in an **83% surge in traffic** to the target page as well as improvements in local visibility — a radical change from tests five years ago, when press releases primarily impacted ranking through backlinks.



Hawkins also found that AI overviews directly quoted press releases, sustaining the conclusion that **earned media has shifted from a backlink tactic to an authoritative input.**

Earned media has always been a trusted third party to human audiences. With the rise of AI, this credibility has extended beyond perception and second-step verification, materializing in proven, measurable visibility across major search platforms.

2. AI Can't Build the Trust Green Companies Need

Beyond discerning AI's hallucinations, audiences have become keenly aware that at a baseline, AI doesn't really know what it's talking about. Many consumers **don't like** reading AI-authored content. **Nor do they trust it.**

AI aggregates and analyzes, locates and generates. It excels in the realm of information.

However, AI also cuts out the transitory phases — understanding your audience, considering context, building a narrative — in which humans mold information into communication. In doing so, it portrays the two as synonymous.



Without contextualization and personalization, information remains a signal. It won't resonate. The story you want to share isn't always the one your audience wants to hear.



A signal becomes a message when it's relayed with the intention of building a relationship — when it aligns with your audience's context, comes from a source they trust, and provides value.

But information is not communication. **Information alone does not build trust.** Inundating an audience with information — especially the cloyingly accurate and sleekly packaged responses churned out by AI — will never be enough to win over hearts and minds. In some cases, it may even be counterproductive, with information overload associated with increased perceptions of greenwashing.

Effective, trust-building communication is a product of relevancy and credibility. Where AI offers neither, PR creates both.

Earning coverage in a top-tier outlet means a journalist found your story credible, newsworthy, and worth their audience's time. That judgment, implicit in every piece of earned media, is something PR professionals alone can secure, curating the narrative and personal relationships

needed to place your story in trusted sources. **When AI generated content is proliferated across platforms, content that actually builds trust is earned.** For sustainability companies trying to build credibility amidst rising regulatory pressure and audience scrutiny, PR and earned media becomes paramount.

Even the greenest companies trying to communicate their sustainability progress are falling short: A **2025 study** found that greenwashing accusations are most prevalent among large companies with high ESG scores.

If they have the evidence to support their claim, why isn't it resonating?

AI, somewhat paradoxically, might point us towards the reason why companies are failing to communicate their sustainability efforts.

Awareness → Belief & buy-in
Visibility → Credibility
Clicks → Citations
Efficiency → Empathy
Reach → Trust

AI is redefining what kind of content produces results.

Marina Psaros and Sylvie Josel from the UN Global Compact's Think Lab on Nature and Biodiversity found AI guilty of **"algorithmic greenwashing"** — when AI tools regurgitate the vague, aspirational language trademark of the corporate sustainability communications on which they were trained.

By surfacing and exaggerating the patterns in sustainability communications, AI forces us to reflect on the deficiencies of the practice as a whole, underscoring the need for **authentic, human language tailored to human contexts** — language that PR, by virtue of *earning* coverage in respected and credible sources, **is obligated to deliver.**

3. PR Solves Greenwashing's Goldilocks Conundrum

Sustainability companies are no strangers to consumer scrutiny. The **terminology** for misguided sustainability communication appears to be expanding almost as fast as the industry itself.

Say too much, and you're **greenwashing** — overpromising on the reality of your sustainability progress.

Say too little, and you're **greenhushing** — withholding information for fear of backlash.

Say it at the wrong time, and you're **greenwishing** — communicating progress before a concrete plan is in place.

As the vernacular expands, the solution remains elusive, caught in its Goldilocks conundrum.

Major companies are countering the flood of content by revving their media-buying engines. However, “cutting through the noise” by leaning into your own channels isn't always effective — especially for green companies: A 2025 **preprint** found that corporate sustainability communications on social media were associated with a 29.11% decrease in engagement value across other platforms.

Audiences in the sustainability space are **particularly wary** of messages shared via paid ads or social posts.

Distrust is thus not merely an issue of content, but one of channel.

PR is the gateway to trusted channels. Unlike owned media, which can be signal of self-interest to audiences, earned media places sustainability claims in a context of editorial independence. That third-party context transforms the claim.

PR also allows companies to communicate their progress iteratively. For example, a product milestone followed by a leadership perspective in a respected trade publication, bolstered by an on-air interview or conference keynote. Coverage in respected outlets gets cited in other trusted sources (researchers, journalists, and now, AI), **accumulating into a long-term record of credibility that sustainable brands can show their customers.**

In turn, PR offers a strategy to coordinate and elevate every form of marketing: amplifying owned content, supporting SEO and GEO, informing social strategy, and strengthening overall brand narrative across channels. **As the global creator economy booms**, PR-led approaches ensure that influencer collaborations are genuine rather than transactional, with every message aligned with the values of both the brand and creator.

Public relations solves greenwashing's Goldilocks conundrum. With PR, there is no longer a “middle ground” for the amount of information a sustainable brand should disclose.

By equipping sustainable brands with messages that resonate, trusted channels to relay them, and a strategy to shape how they land, PR expands the focus from the amount of information a brand discloses to the value they offer. PR is a brand's way of extending a hand to its intended audiences.



Image credit: Tavus

The Human OS for Brand Trust

Information isn't communication. Visibility isn't discoverability. Human authority and authenticity are no longer optional — especially for green companies.

In an increasingly automated and AI-powered world, **public relations is the essential “Human OS” for global trust.** PR builds relationships, creates authentic and contextual narratives, and connects the dots across the media ecosystem. In doing so, it **“facilitates the transformative collaboration required to advance a sustainability agenda.”**

It's in the name. Public: **“Of the people”** — and for their planet.

ARE YOU ADDING TO THE NOISE OR FUTURE-PROOFING YOUR REPUTATION?

Content for the sake of content won't cut it in a media ecosystem inundated with information. Sustainable brands looking to build their reputation with wary audiences need the guidance of public relations experts.



Tony DeFazio
Founder and Principal of
Sustainable PR

About the Author

Tony DeFazio is an accomplished communications and public relations professional with a long history of volunteering and advocating for environmental and sustainable causes. During his nearly 30-year career in public relations, DeFazio built and sold two successful PR agencies and brought a third company public as Director of Communications. DeFazio launched Sustainable PR in 2021 to focus exclusively on serving the communications needs of green companies with an environmental mission. Tony's award-winning media relations campaigns have helped raise the public profile of green companies he represents, delivering an impact and an audience to the environmental missions they serve.

Tony's clients have appeared in media ranging from The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal to Huffington Post, CNBC, FOX Business and Bloomberg TV. Tony has served as Philadelphia Chapter President of the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), award-winner and member of Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) Albany, and the PRSA Counselors Academy. Tony serves as an advisor to the Sustainability Committee of Glens Falls.



About Sustainable PR

Sustainable PR partners with brands who are navigating the sustainability market, representing those with eco-centric products and services and a mission-driven story. We are a storytelling agency first, and we approach message development creatively and proactively to position our client's brands for success in a fast-moving market. Public perception can be hard to predict, and even harder to influence as consumer values and environmental priorities shift. We serve green brands operating in the time of climate change by keeping a finger on the pulse of the media to impact perceptions and raise profiles.

Informed by decades of experience and a mission rooted in sustainability, Sustainable PR specializes in developing compelling earned media campaigns for forward-thinking green brands. The clients we proudly represent consider eco-conscious business practices to be their corporate responsibility, and are blazing a trail as market leaders in the new green economy.

Would your organization benefit from veteran guidance in telling your organization's sustainability story? Get in touch with us at <https://sustainablepr.com/contact/> or call our office at (518) 223-9962 to book a 30 minute video consultation with Sustainable PR today. You'll receive a complimentary evaluation of your story's potential appeal with the media.



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> SOCIAL MEDIA



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