

Business-to-Business Marketing of Sustainable Suppliers: How Message Framing and Evidence Credibility Shape Buyer Trust and Commitment

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Abstract

Sustainable suppliers increasingly compete through their ability to communicate environmental and social value to organizational buyers, yet broad sustainability claims can also create skepticism and greenwashing suspicion. Existing research explains sustainable purchasing, customer value propositions, signaling, and relationship trust largely in separate streams, leaving limited guidance on how message framing and evidence credibility jointly shape business-to-business marketing outcomes. This conceptual article develops an integrative framework based on organizational buying behavior, sustainable value propositions, signaling theory, greenwashing research, business-to-business branding, and relationship marketing. The framework distinguishes environmental-only framing from integrated business-value framing and positions evidence credibility on a continuum from self-reported narrative to quantified, traceable, and independently verified proof. It proposes that integrated framing strengthens perceived sustainability value only when the supporting evidence is sufficiently credible; otherwise, claim breadth increases greenwashing suspicion. Claim credibility and perceived sustainability value jointly build supplier brand trust, which in turn supports supplier shortlisting, willingness to pay, information sharing, and relationship commitment. Buyer sustainability expertise, purchase criticality, relationship stage, and claim-performance consistency are identified as boundary conditions. Twelve propositions, a communication matrix, and a three-study validation program translate the framework into testable research. The article shows how suppliers can market sustainability as credible customer value rather than as unsupported promotional rhetoric.

Keywords: business-to-business marketing; sustainable suppliers; message framing; evidence credibility; buyer trust; greenwashing; relationship commitment

1 | Introduction

Sustainability has become an increasingly visible criterion in organizational purchasing, supplier development, and interfirm relationship management. Business customers are expected to evaluate not only price, quality, delivery, and technical performance, but also the environmental and social consequences embedded in products, operations, and supply networks. Classical organizational buying research explains industrial

purchasing as a multi-actor, information-intensive, and risk-sensitive process [1–3]. Subsequent work shows that environmental concern can enter organizational buying as a non-economic criterion and can reshape how buying centers define acceptable supplier performance [4]. The marketing challenge is therefore not limited to becoming a sustainable supplier; it also involves communicating sustainability in a form that organizational buyers can understand, verify, defend internally, and connect to business value.

Business-to-business (B2B) marketing research has increasingly recognized that sustainability must be integrated with market intelligence, customer value creation, branding, and supply-chain capabilities [5–8]. Suppliers may possess meaningful environmental improvements, but these improvements do not automatically become persuasive value propositions. Buyers may struggle to determine whether a claim is material, whether it applies to the purchased offering, whether the performance can be reproduced, and whether the supplier has selectively disclosed favorable information. Sustainable supplier marketing thus operates under a double information asymmetry: suppliers know more about their own practices than buyers, while buyers know more about the operational, financial, regulatory, and reputational consequences that matter inside the purchasing organization.

This asymmetry creates a managerial tension. Weak or generic sustainability communication can make genuine improvements commercially invisible. By contrast, ambitious claims that extend across environmental, economic, and social benefits may appear strategically attractive but can provoke skepticism when they are not supported by specific and credible evidence. The same message can therefore function either as a value signal or as a greenwashing cue. This problem is particularly consequential in B2B markets, where purchase decisions often involve technical specialists, procurement managers, sustainability officers, finance personnel, and senior executives. A supplier message must survive evaluation across this buying center rather than merely attract initial attention.

Existing research offers important but fragmented foundations. Sustainable value-proposition studies show that environmental and social improvements become more compelling when they are translated into direct economic benefits, risk reduction, and customer outcomes [9–11]. B2B branding research demonstrates that brands reduce information costs and purchase risk and can strengthen confidence in supplier reliability [12–14]. Customer value-proposition research emphasizes that persuasive claims must be relevant, distinctive, and supported with documented evidence rather than broad assertions [15–18]. Signaling theory further explains how observable cues can communicate otherwise difficult-to-verify quality under asymmetric information [19–22]. However, these streams do not yet provide an integrated explanation of how the breadth of a supplier's sustainability message interacts with the credibility of its evidence to shape buyer trust and relationship commitment.

The motivation for this article is therefore both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, the literature needs to distinguish the content of a sustainability value claim from the evidence architecture used to substantiate it. Practically, suppliers need guidance on when to emphasize environmental performance alone, when to translate sustainability into wider business value, and how much verification is required before broader claims become credible. Without this distinction, sustainable supplier marketing risks oscillating between technical disclosure that buyers cannot connect to value and promotional language that buyers cannot trust.

The central research question is: How do sustainability message framing and evidence credibility jointly influence organizational buyer trust and commitment toward a supplier? To address this question, the article develops a credibility-value framework. The first design dimension is message framing. Environmental-only framing emphasizes ecological attributes such as emissions, energy use, recycled content, or waste reduction. Integrated business-value framing connects these effects to customer-relevant consequences, including total cost, operational continuity, regulatory exposure, resilience, end-market reputation, and relationship value. The second dimension is evidence credibility, which ranges from self-reported narrative to quantified, traceable, and independently verified proof.

The main idea is that broader claims are not inherently more persuasive. Integrated business-value framing can increase perceived sustainability value because it makes environmental performance relevant to

organizational objectives. Yet breadth also raises the burden of proof. When evidence credibility is low, an expansive value promise can increase greenwashing suspicion and damage trust. When evidence credibility is high, the same breadth can demonstrate competence, reduce decision risk, and support internal justification across the buying center. The framework therefore predicts an evidence-contingent effect rather than a universal advantage of integrated framing.

The article makes four contributions. First, it positions sustainable supplier communication as a core B2B marketing problem rather than only a supply-chain disclosure task. Second, it integrates customer value-proposition theory with signaling theory by distinguishing claim relevance from claim verifiability. Third, it introduces greenwashing suspicion as a central mechanism in organizational buying and explains how message-evidence misfit erodes supplier brand trust. Fourth, it connects communication design to relationship outcomes, proposing that trust converts credible sustainability claims into shortlisting, willingness to pay, information sharing, and long-term commitment.

The article is organized into six sections. Section 2 reviews organizational buying, sustainable supplier marketing, customer value propositions, message framing, signaling, greenwashing, branding, and relationship trust. Section 3 develops the conceptual framework and propositions. Section 4 derives managerial implications for supplier marketing and sales. Section 5 presents a cumulative empirical validation agenda. Section 6 concludes with the theoretical contribution, limitations, and future research directions.

2 | Literature Review and Theoretical Foundations

2.1 | Conceptual synthesis approach

This article uses an integrative theory-synthesis approach rather than claiming a systematic review or reporting empirical results. The objective is to connect established constructs from organizational buying, B2B marketing, sustainability communication, signaling, greenwashing, branding, and relationship marketing into a coherent explanation of a new focal problem: how suppliers convert sustainability performance into credible market value. The synthesis prioritizes peer-reviewed studies that directly define the focal mechanisms, identify relevant boundary conditions, or provide evidence concerning buyer trust and sustainability communication.

2.2 | Organizational buying and sustainability criteria

Organizational buying differs from household consumption because decisions are often collective, formally accountable, technically complex, and consequential for ongoing operations. Buying centers may contain users, influencers, procurement specialists, gatekeepers, and decision makers with different evaluation criteria [1–3]. Sustainability adds further heterogeneity because environmental objectives can be interpreted as compliance requirements, risk controls, cost-saving opportunities, innovation signals, reputational assets, or ethical obligations. Drumwright's study of socially responsible organizational buying demonstrated that environmental concern can function as a noneconomic criterion and that individual champions may influence purchasing institutions [4].

This complexity implies that a sustainability message must perform multiple functions. It must communicate technical performance to specialists, economic relevance to financial decision makers, implementation feasibility to operations, and legitimacy to executives and sustainability personnel. A claim that appeals to only one member of the buying center may fail to achieve internal consensus. Sustainable supplier marketing must therefore support both external persuasion and internal justification.

2.3 | Sustainable supplier marketing and customer value propositions

Research at the marketing-supply-chain interface argues that sustainability should be linked to customer requirements, product design, demand management, operations, and interorganizational relationships [5–8]. Sustainable value propositions extend this logic by articulating economic, environmental, and social benefits

delivered to customers and wider stakeholders [9]. In business networks, sustainability can become a core element of value co-creation when suppliers help customers improve their own offerings, stakeholder legitimacy, or downstream performance [10]. Branding research similarly suggests that operational sustainability becomes strategically valuable when it is translated into credible associations and promoted through the supplier's corporate or industrial brand [11].

B2B brands are not merely identification devices. They can reduce information-search costs, lower perceived purchase risk, signal consistency, and provide a relational promise [12–14]. These functions are especially important for sustainable offerings because many environmental or social attributes are credence qualities that buyers cannot fully verify before purchase. A trusted supplier brand can simplify evaluation, but branding cannot substitute indefinitely for evidence. If brand promises and observable performance diverge, the same visibility that initially supported differentiation can intensify reputational damage.

Customer value propositions provide the direct bridge from sustainability performance to buyer relevance. Effective value propositions identify the customer problem, specify the benefits created relative to alternatives, and provide evidence that the promised value can be delivered [15–18]. In sustainable supplier marketing, the value proposition should therefore move beyond statements such as 'lower emissions' toward a defensible explanation of how lower emissions affect energy costs, regulatory readiness, supply continuity, customer reporting, product differentiation, or end-market acceptance. This translation is the basis of integrated business-value framing.

2.4 | Message framing in sustainability communication

Message framing concerns the selection and organization of information used to define what a sustainability improvement means. Environmental-only framing presents the ecological attribute itself, such as reduced carbon intensity, less packaging, lower water consumption, or recycled material content. Integrated business-value framing links environmental and social effects to consequences relevant to the customer's organization. Such framing can increase diagnosticity because it connects sustainability with economic and strategic objectives rather than treating it as a separate moral category.

Corporate social responsibility communication research emphasizes that message effectiveness depends on content, stakeholder attributions, communication channels, and the extent of stakeholder involvement [25–28]. Sustainability messages are vulnerable to skepticism because firms possess incentives to emphasize favorable actions and obscure limitations. Message specificity, balanced disclosure, and stakeholder relevance can reduce ambiguity, whereas abstract or self-congratulatory language can increase defensive processing. Framing is therefore not a cosmetic choice; it determines which benefits buyers perceive, which internal stakeholders can use the information, and how much evidence they expect.

Broader claims also create a credibility burden. A narrow claim regarding certified recycled content can be evaluated against a bounded indicator. An integrated claim that promises lower cost, reduced risk, improved reputation, and social value requires multiple causal links and may exceed the evidence available. The persuasive value of message breadth should therefore depend on evidence credibility rather than operate as an unconditional main effect.

2.5 | Signaling, evidence credibility, and verification

Signaling theory explains communication when one party possesses private information and another must infer unobservable quality [19–20]. Marketing research shows that signals are credible when they are difficult to imitate, costly to misuse, or linked to consequences that low-quality firms are unwilling or unable to bear [21–22]. In sustainable supplier marketing, evidence can function as such a signal. Quantified baselines, traceable boundaries, recognized measurement standards, audit trails, independent certification, and customer-specific calculations increase the cost of exaggeration and allow buyers to evaluate the claim.

Evidence credibility is not identical to the volume of information. A lengthy sustainability report can remain weak evidence when indicators are selectively chosen, boundaries are unclear, or claims cannot be traced to

the purchased product. Credible evidence should be specific, relevant to the transaction, methodologically transparent, and verifiable. Research on eco-labels and sustainability ratings indicates that source independence and argument specificity can increase trust and constrain greenwashing [23–24]. Communication scholarship likewise stresses that firms must explain both what they have achieved and how stakeholders can evaluate the claim [25–26].

The framework therefore conceptualizes evidence architecture as a continuum. At the lowest level, suppliers offer self-reported narrative with limited quantification. The next level includes specific indicators, baselines, and product boundaries. A stronger level adds traceability to operational records and customer-use assumptions. The highest level includes independent verification, recognized certification, or auditable life-cycle evidence. The appropriate level depends on claim breadth, purchase criticality, and buyer expertise.

2.6 | Greenwashing suspicion, supplier brand trust, and commitment

Greenwashing refers broadly to communication that creates an overly favorable impression of environmental performance relative to underlying practices. Research identifies selective disclosure, vague claims, symbolic actions, and inconsistencies between communication and performance as recurring mechanisms [29–32]. Empirical studies show that perceived greenwashing can increase confusion and perceived risk and can weaken trust [33–34]. Although much of this work examines consumer markets, the mechanism is highly relevant to organizational buying because professional buyers are accountable for supplier risk and may interpret unsubstantiated claims as indicators of weak governance.

Supplier brand trust is the buyer's willingness to rely on the supplier under conditions of uncertainty and vulnerability. Relationship-marketing theory positions trust and commitment as central mediators of successful exchanges [35]. Industrial buying research shows that trust develops through reputation, competence, benevolence, consistent performance, and credible communication and influences anticipated future interaction [36–37]. Meta-analytic evidence further indicates that relationship quality is particularly important in business markets and critical exchanges [38]. Trust also supports cooperation and partnership development [39–41].

Sustainable supplier marketing can strengthen trust when communication reduces uncertainty and demonstrates both capability and integrity. However, trust is not generated by positive framing alone. It emerges when the promised value, supporting evidence, and observed behavior are mutually consistent. Studies of green supply chains and supply-chain reputation similarly identify trust, legitimacy, and branding as important conditions for sustainability implementation and interfirm cooperation [42–43].

Table 1 synthesizes the focal literature and the unresolved issue addressed by the proposed framework.

Table 1. Literature synthesis and focal research gap

Research stream	Established insight	Unresolved issue	Framework contribution
Organizational buying	Buying is collective, accountable, and risk sensitive [1–4].	How sustainability claims gain acceptance across heterogeneous buying-center roles.	Treats internal justification as a central marketing outcome.
Sustainable B2B marketing	Sustainability must connect marketing, purchasing, operations, and customer value [5–11].	How suppliers translate performance into persuasive customer value without overclaiming.	Distinguishes environmental-only and integrated business-value framing.
B2B branding and value propositions	Brands and documented value propositions reduce risk and information costs [12–18].	When broad value promises create trust rather than skepticism.	Links value relevance to evidence sufficiency.
Signaling and verification	Specific, costly, and independently supported signals reduce information asymmetry [19–24].	What constitutes credible evidence for supplier sustainability claims.	Defines a hierarchy of evidence architecture.
Greenwashing and relationships	Message-performance inconsistency increases suspicion and weakens trust [29–43].	How greenwashing suspicion converts communication design into relational outcomes.	Positions trust as the bridge to commitment and buyer behavior.

3 | Conceptual Framework and Propositions

3.1 | The two-dimensional communication architecture

The framework treats sustainable supplier marketing as the joint design of a value claim and an evidence system. Message framing determines which meaning is assigned to sustainability performance. Evidence credibility determines whether the buyer can reasonably rely on that meaning. These dimensions are analytically distinct. A supplier may possess strong verified evidence but communicate it in a technically narrow form that creates little perceived customer value. Alternatively, a supplier may present an attractive integrated value narrative without sufficient proof. The strongest configuration combines customer-relevant framing with evidence proportionate to the breadth of the claim.

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework. Message framing primarily influences perceived sustainability value, whereas evidence architecture primarily influences claim credibility. Evidence also constrains greenwashing suspicion. Perceived sustainability value and claim credibility strengthen supplier brand trust, while greenwashing suspicion weakens it. Trust then affects supplier shortlisting, willingness to pay, information sharing, and relationship commitment. Buyer expertise, purchase criticality, relationship stage, and claim-performance consistency operate as boundary conditions.

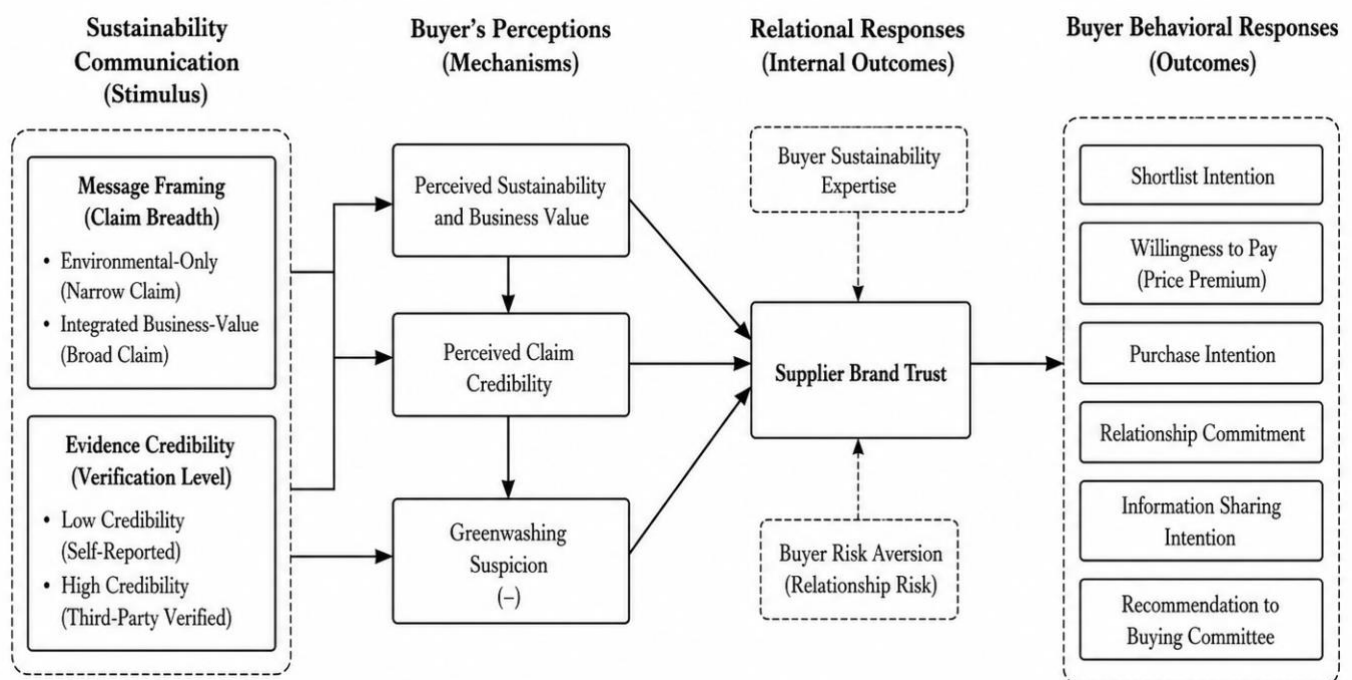


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework linking sustainability message framing and evidence credibility to organizational buyer trust and commitment.

3.2 | The value-framing pathway

Environmental-only framing communicates ecological performance but leaves the buyer to infer its organizational relevance. This approach may be appropriate when the purchase specification already defines the sustainability criterion or when compliance is the primary objective. Integrated business-value framing goes further by translating sustainability into operational and strategic consequences. For example, energy efficiency can be expressed as lifetime operating-cost reduction; verified emissions performance can be connected to reporting obligations and customer-scope emissions; circular design can be linked to material security and end-of-life liability.

This translation should increase perceived sustainability value because it aligns supplier performance with the goals used by buying-center members. The effect should be strongest when the claimed consequences are

customer specific rather than generic. An integrated message that merely adds multiple positive adjectives does not create value; the frame must establish plausible causal links between the sustainability attribute and the buyer's outcomes.

Proposition 1. Integrated business-value framing increases perceived sustainability value relative to environmental-only framing when the message establishes explicit and customer-relevant links between sustainability performance and organizational outcomes.

Integrated framing can also facilitate buying-center consensus. Technical personnel can evaluate the environmental metric, procurement can assess total value, finance can evaluate cost and risk, and senior managers can consider legitimacy and strategic alignment. A common value narrative reduces the translation burden placed on an internal champion and makes the supplier easier to defend during formal evaluation.

Proposition 2. Perceived sustainability value increases buying-center consensus and the likelihood that a sustainable supplier is included on the organizational shortlist.

3.3 | The evidence-credibility pathway

Evidence credibility reflects the buyer's judgment that the sustainability claim is specific, traceable, methodologically appropriate, and independently supportable. Self-reported narratives may create awareness but provide limited protection against strategic exaggeration. Quantified indicators improve diagnosticity when the baseline, unit of analysis, time period, and product boundary are clear. Traceability and independent verification further strengthen the signal because they expose the supplier to reputational or contractual consequences if the claim is false.

Proposition 3. Quantification, traceability, and independent verification each increase claim credibility, with the strongest effect occurring when all three are jointly present.

Evidence must also be decision relevant. A third-party certification can be credible yet insufficient when it applies to a facility rather than the purchased product, addresses a narrow attribute, or does not indicate performance relative to alternatives. Buyers should therefore evaluate both source credibility and evidentiary fit. Evidence that directly corresponds to the focal claim should have a stronger effect than prestigious but weakly related certification.

Proposition 4. The positive effect of third-party verification on claim credibility is stronger when the verified scope corresponds directly to the purchased offering and the benefits asserted in the marketing message.

3.4 | Message-evidence fit and greenwashing suspicion

The two dimensions interact because claim breadth determines the amount and diversity of evidence needed. Environmental-only claims create a relatively bounded verification task. Integrated business-value claims require evidence for the environmental improvement and for its economic, operational, relational, or reputational consequences. When the claim expands faster than the supporting evidence, buyers are likely to infer promotional opportunism rather than superior value.

Figure 2 organizes the four principal communication configurations. Low-evidence environmental framing produces a generic green claim with limited differentiation. High-evidence environmental framing creates verified compliance or risk-reduction value. Low-evidence integrated framing is the most vulnerable configuration because ambitious benefits are not substantiated. High-evidence integrated framing creates a credible sustainable value proposition.

		Evidence Credibility (Verification Level)		Expected Overall Effect (on Supplier Trust)
		Low Credibility (Self-Reported)	High Credibility (Third-Party Verified)	
Message Framing (Claim Breadth)	Environmental-Only (Narrow Claim)	Quadrant 1 Narrow Claim + Low Credibility (Highest Greenwashing Risk, Lowest Trust)	Quadrant 2 Narrow Claim + High Credibility (Moderate Value Perceived, Moderate Trust)	
	Integrated Business-Value (Broad Claim)	Quadrant 3 Broad Claim + Low Credibility (Skepticism Due to Overclaiming, Moderate–Low Trust)	Quadrant 4 Broad Claim + High Credibility (Highest Perceived Value, Highest Trust and Preference)	

Expected Overall Effect (on Supplier Trust)

$Q4 > Q2 > Q3 > Q1$

Q4: Most Favorable Condition

Q1: Least Favorable Condition

Fig. 2. Supplier sustainability communication matrix based on message framing and evidence credibility.

Proposition 5. *Evidence credibility moderates the effect of integrated business-value framing: integrated framing increases buyer trust when evidence credibility is high but increases greenwashing suspicion when evidence credibility is low.*

Greenwashing suspicion should be especially sensitive to inconsistencies. Buyers compare the focal message with prior supplier behavior, public disclosures, sales claims, certifications, and observed delivery. Even strong evidence attached to one offering may fail to create trust if the supplier's wider conduct contradicts the advertised positioning. Conversely, transparent acknowledgment of limitations can strengthen credibility by signaling balanced disclosure.

Proposition 6. *Claim-performance inconsistency increases greenwashing suspicion, whereas balanced disclosure of material limitations reduces suspicion when accompanied by credible improvement evidence.*

3.5 | Supplier brand trust and organizational buyer responses

Perceived sustainability value and claim credibility represent different components of buyer judgment. Value answers whether the claim matters; credibility answers whether the claim can be believed. Either component alone is insufficient. A credible but irrelevant claim will not influence choice, while a valuable but unsubstantiated promise will not support reliance. Their joint presence should therefore produce a complementary effect on supplier brand trust.

Proposition 7. *Perceived sustainability value and claim credibility each increase supplier brand trust, and their joint presence produces a stronger effect than either mechanism alone.*

Greenwashing suspicion should directly weaken trust because it raises questions about integrity, governance, and future disclosure. In B2B relationships, the consequence extends beyond attitude toward a single message. A buyer that doubts the supplier's sustainability communication may question technical claims, reporting data, risk disclosure, and contractual commitments more generally.

Proposition 8. *Greenwashing suspicion reduces supplier brand trust and partially offsets the positive effect of perceived sustainability value on buyer responses.*

Trust should influence both transactional and relational outcomes. It can reduce perceived selection risk, support shortlisting, justify a price premium for lower lifecycle risk or superior value, facilitate information sharing, and encourage long-term commitment. Trust may be especially important when sustainability value is co-created over time and depends on joint data collection, process adaptation, or customer-supplier innovation.

Proposition 9. Supplier brand trust positively influences supplier shortlisting, willingness to pay, strategic information sharing, and relationship commitment.

3.6 | Boundary conditions and the credibility threshold

Buyer sustainability expertise should change both attention and standards. Expert buyers can interpret technical indicators and detect boundary manipulation, making them less dependent on general brand cues and more responsive to evidence quality. Less-expert buyers may rely more heavily on certification, reputation, and simplified value narratives. Expertise may therefore strengthen the penalty for message-evidence misfit while improving the response to well-designed proof.

Proposition 10. Buyer sustainability expertise strengthens the positive effect of high-quality evidence and the negative effect of message-evidence inconsistency on supplier brand trust.

Purchase criticality should increase the evidence threshold. When the purchase has high financial value, operational consequences, regulatory exposure, or reputational visibility, buyers face greater accountability and should demand stronger verification. Relationship stage also matters. New suppliers lack a behavioral history and must rely more heavily on formal evidence and reputation. Established suppliers can draw on accumulated experience, but prior trust should not immunize them against contradictory claims.

Proposition 11. The evidence required for integrated business-value framing to increase trust is higher for critical purchases and new supplier relationships than for routine purchases and established relationships.

The combined model predicts the interaction shown in Figure 3. When evidence credibility is high, broader claims can increase trust because they reveal more dimensions of customer value. When evidence credibility is low, trust may initially rise as the claim becomes more relevant but then decline once the message exceeds the buyer's credibility threshold. The result is not a universal preference for narrow communication; it is a requirement that claim ambition be matched by evidence architecture.

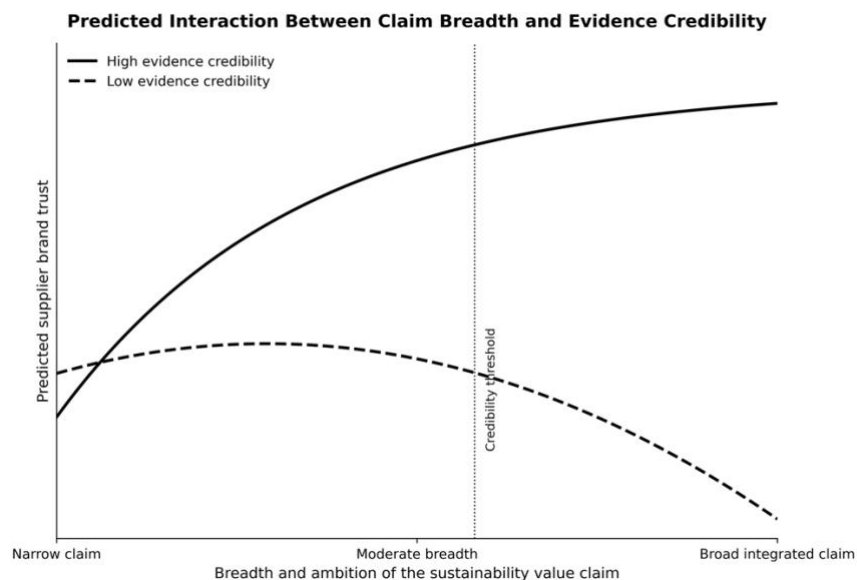


Fig. 3. Predicted interaction between sustainability-claim breadth and evidence credibility in shaping supplier brand trust.

Proposition 12. *Under low evidence credibility, the relationship between sustainability-claim breadth and supplier brand trust is inverted-U shaped; under high evidence credibility, broader customer-relevant claims produce a positive but diminishing trust effect.*

Table 2 summarizes the principal constructs and provides operational guidance for future empirical research.

Table 2. Construct definitions and operational guidance

Construct	Conceptual definition	Illustrative manipulation or measure	Expected role
Message framing	How sustainability performance is translated into buyer meaning.	Environmental-only versus integrated economic, operational, risk, and reputational value.	Exogenous communication variable.
Evidence credibility	Perceived specificity, traceability, methodological adequacy, and verifiability of proof.	Self-report, quantified data, traceable records, independent verification.	Exogenous evidence variable and moderator.
Perceived sustainability value	Buyer judgment that the offering creates relevant environmental, economic, or strategic benefits.	Adapt customer-value scales to the supplier sustainability context.	Value-pathway mediator.
Claim credibility	Belief that the claim is accurate, supportable, and likely to be delivered.	Items addressing believability, substantiation, and evidentiary fit.	Credibility-pathway mediator.
Greenwashing suspicion	Inference that the message overstates or selectively represents actual performance.	Suspicion, exaggeration, selective disclosure, and inconsistency items.	Negative mediator.
Supplier brand trust	Willingness to rely on the supplier under uncertainty and vulnerability.	Adapt industrial supplier and brand-trust measures [35–37].	Central relational mediator.
Buyer responses	Transactional and relational consequences of the communication.	Shortlisting, choice, price premium, information sharing, and commitment.	Dependent variables.

4 | Managerial Implications for Sustainable Supplier Marketing

4.1 | Translate environmental performance into customer business value

Supplier marketers should begin with verified operational performance and then identify the customer consequences that can be defended. The communication sequence should be attribute, mechanism, customer outcome, and evidence. For example, a lower-energy production process becomes commercially meaningful when the supplier can show how it reduces embedded emissions, protects the buyer against future energy-price exposure, supports reporting obligations, or strengthens the buyer's downstream value proposition. This

translation should be customer specific; generic statements about saving the planet rarely support organizational decision making.

Marketing and sales teams should work with operations, engineering, sustainability, and finance to build a value dictionary that maps each sustainability indicator to plausible customer outcomes. Claims should be segmented by buying-center role. Technical details can support specialists, while concise economic and risk implications can support procurement and executives. The objective is one coherent value proposition with multiple evidence layers, not inconsistent messages for different audiences.

4.2 | Build an evidence architecture before expanding the claim

Evidence should be designed as a system rather than collected after a campaign is written. Each claim should have a defined unit of analysis, baseline, time period, product boundary, calculation method, data owner, and verification status. Supplier marketers should distinguish evidence that proves operational performance from evidence that proves customer value. A verified emissions reduction does not automatically prove lower total cost; the economic claim requires additional assumptions and customer-specific calculation.

A practical governance rule is that claim breadth should never exceed evidence breadth. When only a narrow attribute is verified, the message should remain narrow or explicitly label wider benefits as estimates. When a supplier possesses traceable product-level evidence and a validated customer-value model, integrated framing becomes appropriate. This discipline protects the brand and gives salespeople a defensible basis for answering buyer questions.

4.3 | Make verification usable inside the buying center

Third-party certification is valuable only when buyers can understand its scope. Suppliers should provide a concise evidence summary showing what was verified, by whom, against which standard, for what period, and with what limitations. Detailed documentation can remain available for technical evaluation, but the initial message should make the evidentiary chain legible. Digital product passports, traceability records, audit summaries, and customer-specific calculators can support this objective when their governance is clear.

Sales enablement materials should anticipate internal buyer questions. A strong evidence package allows a purchasing manager to explain the claim to finance, sustainability, legal, and operations without reconstructing the argument. This internal transmissibility is an important form of marketing value because organizational purchases depend on collective approval.

4.4 | Manage greenwashing risk as a relationship risk

Greenwashing should not be treated only as a communication-compliance issue. In B2B markets, an exaggerated claim can weaken the buyer's confidence in the supplier's broader information quality. Firms should therefore establish cross-functional claim review, version control, approved evidence repositories, and clear rules for sales customization. Balanced disclosure should be encouraged when important limitations exist. A claim such as 'verified reduction within the manufacturing boundary; downstream use effects are not included' may be more persuasive to professional buyers than an unqualified promise.

Managers should monitor trust-related indicators alongside campaign reach. Relevant measures include evidence-request rates, buyer objections, shortlisting conversion, price-premium acceptance, sustainability-data sharing, contract renewal, and discrepancies discovered during due diligence. Marketing effectiveness should be evaluated by whether communication creates credible preference and durable relationships, not merely by whether it attracts attention.

5 | Empirical Validation Agenda

The propositions are designed for empirical testing and are not presented as established effects. A cumulative program should separate framing effects, evidence effects, buying-center dynamics, and market behavior.

Studies should use realistic supplier proposals, professional respondents where possible, and behavioral outcomes rather than relying exclusively on general attitudes.

5.1| Study 1: Message framing and evidence credibility

Study 1 should use a factorial experiment manipulating environmental-only versus integrated business-value framing and low versus high evidence credibility. Participants could evaluate a supplier proposal for an industrial component, packaging material, logistics service, or energy-efficient production technology. High-credibility evidence should include quantified product-level indicators, a clear baseline, traceability, and independent verification; low-credibility evidence should rely on general self-reported statements.

The primary outcomes should be perceived sustainability value, claim credibility, greenwashing suspicion, supplier brand trust, and shortlisting intention. The study should test moderated mediation: integrated framing should increase trust through value under high credibility but increase suspicion under low credibility. A professional sample of purchasing, operations, sustainability, and managerial respondents would allow comparison across buying-center roles.

5.2| Study 2: Buying-center expertise, criticality, and consensus

Study 2 should examine boundary conditions using either a multi-sample experiment or a simulated buying-center design. Purchase criticality can be manipulated through financial value, operational dependence, and regulatory exposure. Sustainability expertise can be measured or manipulated through training. Participants should evaluate the same supplier evidence individually and then make a group recommendation. This design can assess whether credible integrated framing improves consensus and whether experts impose a higher penalty on unsupported breadth.

Process measures should include information search, evidence requests, time to decision, confidence, disagreement, and the arguments used to justify the supplier. These outcomes would reveal whether sustainable supplier marketing reduces internal decision friction rather than only improving stated preference.

5.3| Study 3: Field choice and relationship consequences

Study 3 should test the framework in a field or high-fidelity procurement setting. A supplier could vary the framing and evidence package used in qualified lead campaigns, tender responses, or account-based marketing. Outcomes might include document downloads, meetings, requests for verification, advancement through procurement stages, willingness to share operational data, negotiated price, and contract renewal. Where randomization is not possible, matched accounts or phased implementation could improve causal interpretation.

A longitudinal design is important because trust and commitment develop over repeated interactions. The study should compare initial message response with later due-diligence findings and delivery performance. Such evidence would test whether marketing claims create durable trust or only temporary persuasion.

5.4| Measurement and analytical safeguards

Measures should be adapted conservatively from established customer-value, credibility, greenwashing, trust, and relationship-commitment research. Claim credibility must remain distinct from supplier trust: credibility concerns the focal message, whereas trust concerns reliance on the supplier. Greenwashing suspicion should be measured as an inference rather than as proven deception. Behavioral willingness to pay should be elicited through choice or incentive-compatible methods when feasible.

Researchers should pretest the realism and evidentiary scope of stimuli, preregister primary hypotheses, separate manipulations from mediators, and include attention and comprehension checks. Independent experts should assess whether the evidence objectively supports the claim. Replication across countries,

product categories, and relationship stages is necessary because sustainability institutions and verification norms differ across markets.

Table 3. Proposed cumulative empirical validation program

Study and proposition coverage	Core design	Primary mechanisms	Behavioral outcomes
1. Message framing × evidence credibility (P1–P9)	2 × 2 experiment using a realistic sustainable supplier proposal.	Perceived sustainability value, claim credibility, greenwashing suspicion, and supplier brand trust.	Supplier shortlisting, product choice, and willingness to pay.
2. Buying-center conditions (P2, P5, P10–P11)	Comparison of sustainability expertise and purchase criticality using individual and group decisions.	Evidence thresholds, buying-center consensus, and internal justification.	Information search, evidence requests, and group recommendation.
3. Field and longitudinal validation (P6–P12)	Account-based marketing or procurement-stage field test with follow-up on delivery performance.	Trust formation and claim–performance consistency.	Meetings, tender progression, information sharing, negotiated price, and renewal.

6 | Conclusion

Sustainable suppliers do not compete through operational performance alone. They also compete through their ability to make sustainability meaningful, credible, and defensible to organizational buyers. This article argues that sustainable supplier marketing should be understood as the joint design of message framing and evidence architecture. Environmental-only framing can communicate a bounded attribute, whereas integrated business-value framing can connect sustainability to cost, risk, resilience, compliance, reputation, and relationship value. The latter offers greater marketing potential but also imposes a higher burden of proof.

The proposed framework explains why the same broad sustainability message can create either trust or suspicion. When quantified, traceable, and independently relevant evidence supports the claim, integrated framing increases perceived sustainability value and claim credibility. When evidence is weak, breadth becomes a liability and can trigger greenwashing suspicion. Value and credibility jointly strengthen supplier brand trust, while suspicion weakens it. Trust then supports shortlisting, willingness to pay, strategic information sharing, and relationship commitment.

The article contributes to B2B marketing by integrating organizational buying, sustainable value propositions, signaling, branding, greenwashing, and relationship marketing around a common message-evidence fit problem. It also provides a practical principle: suppliers should not ask only what sustainability benefits they can claim, but what customer value they can demonstrate and what evidence allows a professional buyer to rely on that demonstration.

This conceptual framework has limitations. The propositions require empirical testing, evidence credibility may vary across certification regimes and industries, and the proposed mechanisms may operate differently in public procurement, small-firm purchasing, global supply networks, and established strategic partnerships. The framework also focuses on supplier-originated communication and does not fully model competing claims, platform ratings, regulatory disclosures, or buyer-generated sustainability data. Future research should implement the proposed experiments and field studies, develop validated measures of organizational greenwashing suspicion, examine buying-center disagreement and internal advocacy, test digital traceability and product-passport evidence, and investigate how credible sustainability marketing affects long-term supplier performance across cultural and institutional contexts.

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Author Contribution

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Data Availability

No new data were created or analyzed in this conceptual study. Data sharing is therefore not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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