



THE CENTER FOR
FOOD INTEGRITYSM

OPTIMIZING SUSTAINABILITY PROJECT

RESPONDING TO REQUESTS FOR COMMITMENT

FoodIntegrity.org

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THE CENTER FOR
FOOD INTEGRITY

OUR MISSION

*Helping Today's Food System
Earn Consumer Trust.*

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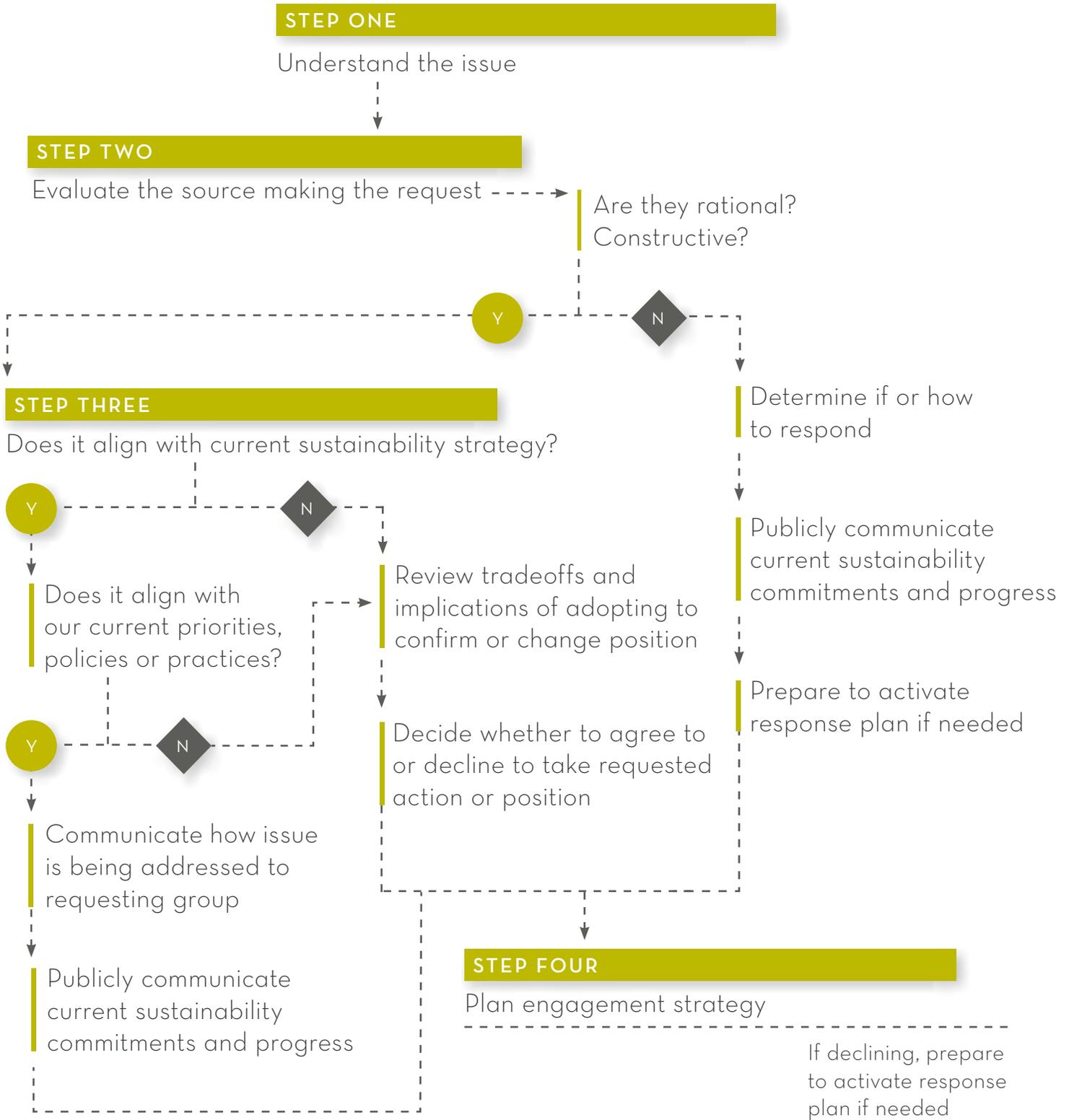


INTRODUCTION

A variety of interest groups and other organizations are harnessing the increased interest in the evolving definition of sustainability to capture opportunity or promote a specific agenda. As a result, a new and growing challenge is the focus on a single ingredient, process or practice without accounting for the potential impact on the entire food system. For example, pressure to change the genetics of broiler chickens or eliminate technology used in dairy or pork production may have perceived benefits to animal well-being, but could also have significant negative impacts on water use, land use, greenhouse gas production, increased demand for fossil fuel and affordability of quality protein when more resources are required to deliver the same quantity of chicken, pork and dairy products.

The decision making framework in this document is intended to give food system stakeholders a tool and process to evaluate requests by stakeholders to adopt or reject a specific practice, taking into consideration the inter-related nature of food production systems and the impacts and tradeoffs of individual decisions. With this information companies can make better informed decisions that are aligned with their values, the values of their stakeholders and their business objectives. The process is designed to both help companies make decisions and to communicate those decisions.

DECISION PROCESS



Request for Sustainability Commitment

A STRATEGIC DECISION-MAKING AND RESPONSE PROCESS

This decision tree and guidance provide a framework for making an informed, thoughtful and strategic decision when responding to groups that request a specific sustainability policy or practice or execute a campaign to pressure a commitment.

STEP ONE

Understand the Issue

Are you familiar with the issue/have you considered it in the past? Is the issue and issue environment unchanged since your last evaluation?

- ▶ If **YES**, continue to **STEP TWO**
- ▶ If **NO**, research the issue to be sure the company fully understands the current state of the issue, implications and tradeoffs.
 - Who internally (functional area or subject matter expert) or externally (supplier, customer, trade association) has expertise on this topic?
 - What are the industry and competitors' positions on this topic?
 - Should this be elevated to an industry issue vs. a brand or company position?
 - Should this be addressed by or in partnership with supplier(s) or others in the value chain?
 - It may be a subject that can be explored on a pre-competitive basis. Consider working through a third-party such as a commodity or industry trade association, sustainability group or non-governmental organization to share information and collaborate with others in a pre-competitive environment. See the Resources section for credible organizations and information.

GUIDANCE Don't be rushed or pressured into making a commitment before fully understanding the issue and potential impacts on your current priorities, your customers, your supply chain and other stakeholders. Just as determining your sustainability strategy was a strategic decision-making process, additional commitments or changes should undergo similar scrutiny. It is important to understand the potential ramifications up and down the value chain and on other attributes of sustainability. Consider where change would have to occur and how much is within your control vs. actions others must take, etc.

It's OK to maintain one position publicly while you evaluate the issue internally and consider a potential change. During the evaluation process, you may have a public position that supports and explains your current strategy, while concurrently having conversations with others and researching an issue. A posture of transparency and openness to differing points of view builds trust with stakeholders.

Evaluate the Source

Start by evaluating the source of the request to determine engagement strategy. Who is asking? Do they have a track record of constructive collaboration?

Research the group making the request, evaluating:

- ✓ Track record of positive interaction/collaboration - are they interested in finding solutions or just agitating? What is their end goal - improving sustainability or elimination of a specific practice, business or industry?
- ✓ Influence/credibility - What is their presence online and in social media? How many members or followers? Do they appear to be mainstream or fringe? Do they base their positions on well-researched, science-based information or on emotional appeals? What is the potential impact on your brand or customers?
- ✓ What have they done in the past with other companies or brands, what are they likely to do? In this case, past performance is a likely predictor of future actions.
 - Have they engaged in unethical or illegal activities in the past to achieve their objectives?
 - Do they utilize legal action such as lawsuits or regulatory petitions?
 - Do they apply pressure via customer or consumers to push for change?
- ✓ Utilize outside resources for information on groups - commodity organizations, competitors, trade associations, Better Business Bureau, and social media influence measures are sources for insight into unfamiliar individuals or groups. Don't hesitate to reach out to others for insight on their experience with the group.

GUIDANCE It will be more productive to work with groups that offer a solution or are genuinely interested in collaboration vs. just raising an issue to promote their agenda. For those not genuinely interested in constructive engagement, you may have to take a principled stand that is in opposition to their position. In this situation, having a transparent and inclusive process that supports your position is essential. Research from CFI shows that if you share how and why you make policy decisions, you are much more likely to minimize outrage and opposition to the decision, even if stakeholders don't ultimately agree with the decision made. Demonstrating your willingness to engage, listen and evaluate will make your final decision more acceptable for many and tolerable for others.

Evaluate the nature of the request - does it appear to be part of a mass communication (letter or email) to multiple companies or targeted to your specific company or brand? Contact your trade association to see if others have received a similar request. Research the requesting group's website and social media properties to see if this is part of a new campaign. If it is part of a mass outreach, it may be possible

to refer it to an industry group or coordinate a response strategy with others who were also contacted.

Even if it appears to be a mass outreach or fishing expedition or is being made by an extreme group, completely ignoring or dismissing the contact carries risk. No response may be construed as a refusal to consider their position and may cause them to pursue more aggressive tactics to get your attention, such as posting their request on social media or going to customers, shareholders or even legal or regulatory channels. A response from a trade association is one way to acknowledge the request and perhaps provide clarifying information with putting any one company or brand in the spotlight.

GUIDANCE If you determine the group is credible it is important to acknowledge the contact with an initial response while you work through your internal process. Waiting until you have a definitive response or plan of action could be interpreted as a refusal to engage and inadvertently trigger additional action to gain your attention. If you determine the group is more interested in agitating than finding a solution, you may decide not to respond. Be prepared for a negative reaction if you choose not to respond to the request. Prepare to activate your response plan if needed to again communicate your commitment to sustainability and willingness to engage reasonable stakeholders.

In your response:

- ✓ Acknowledge the concerns raised
- ✓ Request additional information or clarification if needed
- ✓ Communicate that you are gathering information about the concern
- ✓ Commit to a status update within a specified timeframe and in a specific way. Avoid committing to a public statement, an in-person meeting or a specific outcome at this point.
- ✓ Ask that the group making the request review your current sustainability priorities and identify how this request aligns with current commitments. This sets the stage for a more productive discussion about trade-offs.

Also prepare a holding statement reflecting your willingness to consider the issue in the context of your current sustainability priorities. Hold statement until needed for media or customer/consumer response.



STEP THREE

Does it Align with the Current Strategy?

Where does the issue fall within your current Sustainability Strategy? Is it aligned with current sustainability and CSR priorities and principles? If your organization does not have a sustainability strategy, use the Setting Sustainability Priorities module to develop one.

Is the practice or policy being requested consistent with sustainability commitments, business objectives and company values? At the highest level, does the request fall within one of the Social, Economic or Environmental dimensions you have prioritized?

- ▶ If **YES**, more specifically, does it align with your current priorities, policies or practices? Are you already addressing their issue in actual practice or the core concern or issue in another way? For instance, if the solution suggested isn't feasible at this time, is the concern or practice being studied or should time and resources be invested to continue to explore the issue?
 - If **YES**, communicate how the issue is being addressed to requesting group
 - Publicly communicate current sustainability commitments and progress so your position is on the record and available to those who are interested.
- ▶ If **NO**, (does not align or is out of scope of current priorities on the strategy or priority, policy or practice area), review potential tradeoffs (use the Evaluating Sustainability Tradeoffs module for guidance) and implications to confirm or potentially change position to determine if a change in practice or policy is warranted.
 - Evaluate how the request impacts current sustainability priorities, whether it aligns with company values and business objectives.

Questions to consider:

- ✓ What is your overall sustainability strategy – do you want to lead, collaborate, follow or oppose? Strategic consideration within this framework will help provide a compass to guide your decision.
- ✓ If it is not part of your current strategy, should it be? Has the situation changed since you established your position such that you should re-consider this as a priority? Consider issues that may currently be out-of-scope of your priorities, but evaluate trade-offs before making a decision to change priorities.
 - What are the tradeoffs if you modify your sustainability position? What impacts will the practice or policy have on stated sustainability goals/strategies and other CSR commitments? Use the Evaluating Sustainability Tradeoffs module to aid in this evaluation.
- ✓ What is the economic impact of adopting the policy or practice on input costs, your suppliers, customers or investment in other sustainability initiatives?
- ✓ How important is this to other stakeholders? Who might support a move in this direction? Who might oppose it?

GUIDANCE In all likelihood, you are not the first company to be pressured on the issue. It is highly likely that information exists that can help you evaluate the impact of the request on your current sustainability priorities. Many sustainability issues have been well researched with existing data that can inform your evaluation. See the Resources section for information sources. If you are having trouble finding information, CFI can help connect you to organizations that have evaluated the issue in question.

- ▶ Prepare to publicly communicate current sustainability commitments and progress
 - It is important to communicate and demonstrate your commitment to sustainability and CSR priorities, as well as your willingness to engage reasonable critics and stakeholders that raise important issues, even if the issue they raise is not aligned with your current position. Depending on the level of pressure and the posture of the group making the request, you may need to publicly address the issue and your willingness to engage stakeholders while you are still evaluating whether or not to change your policy or practice.
 - At minimum, review your website to be sure sustainability information is current and accessible to the public.

GUIDANCE Don't kill the message because you may not like the messenger. Just because you initially may not see common ground with a person or group, consider the issue being raised in an objective way. Perhaps the ask is far beyond what you could reasonably commit to, but is there an aspect of the request that can be addressed or might align with your overall strategy? Looking for scenarios that are win-win for both parties can lead to a more positive outcome even if it is less than full adoption of their position.

Plan Engagement Strategy

Once you have reviewed the issue and made a decision on whether or not to adopt the requested position, determine your engagement strategy to communicate your position. Based on your evaluation of the group making the request and your position on the request itself, the next step is to decide if and how to respond to the group. Engagement is not all or nothing, but falls on a continuum and can take many forms, ranging from a simple written response to in-person meetings and an ongoing relationship. *Consider your goal and the potential outcomes from engagement:*

- ✓ **BEST:** Mutual understanding, form collaborative relationship, public endorsement of your company or brand
- ✓ Provide balancing information to better inform their position. Agree to ongoing dialog or agree to disagree
- ✓ **MORE CHALLENGING:** No common ground possible, public attack on your company or brand. While this may be more challenging to manage in the short term, consistently maintaining a principled approach to similar requests will allow you to build credibility with multiple stakeholders over time. Changing practices frequently when pressured can make your company a target for others seeking to advance their position on a variety of issues. Basing your decision on your sustainability priorities and business objectives is the best long-term strategy.

At a minimum, engaging with groups seeking to influence your position is an opportunity to better understand the issue and their perspective, to learn about the group and how much they know about the topic. It's also an opportunity to correct misinformation if needed, and provide a more balanced or informed view of the issue. You may also be able to form an opinion of how trustworthy they may be, gauge the likely success of further engagement and get a sense of what the next steps may be. If nothing else, engagement allows you to demonstrate that you listened and tried to find common ground; important in building trust with your stakeholders.

GUIDANCE Don't kill the messenger because of the message. Don't assume because someone is critical of a practice or position that they are hostile or unreasonable or someone with whom you can't engage. While you may not agree with your critics or share their viewpoint or objectives, in most cases they are genuinely committed to their cause, not just out to attack. Beneath layers of disagreement about policies and practices often lies a value that is shared by both stakeholders and the company. It may relate to protecting natural resources, ensuring animal well-being, addressing food insecurity or malnutrition or other issues. Identifying shared values can be the first step in developing trust that becomes the foundation for successful engagement. Being able to communicate your commitment to a shared value, even when you don't adopt the proposed solution, helps demonstrate your commitment to sustainability and builds trust.

- ▶ If declining the request, plan an engagement strategy that emphasizes your sustainability priorities and the impact of the request on other commitments
 - The response should acknowledge their concern, communicate current priorities and reiterate commitment to sustainability to the group
 - Evaluate whether there is value in continuing the engagement, and if not, end engagement
 - Value can be determined in the following ways:
 - ✓ Does the group offer a perspective that could help inform the company on the issue or sustainability strategies?
 - ✓ Are they willing to engage constructively, or are they simply trying to agitate to promote their agenda?
 - Publicly communicate current sustainability commitments and progress concurrent with communicating your decision to the group
 - Be prepared for a negative reaction to your response. Prepare to activate your response plan if needed to again communicate your commitment to sustainability and willingness to engage reasonable stakeholders

GUIDANCE More often than not, engagement at some level is better than ignoring groups that may be critical of your company or practices. Effective stakeholder engagement is increasingly complex. Not all stakeholders are created equal - some are intractable ideologues and others may be reasonable reformers. Engaging ideologues may result in pointless confrontation, while reformers may bring positive change or a new understanding of the issue. In most cases, it's important to engage and listen. A willingness to engage stakeholders demonstrates the organization is reasonable, rational and open to considering a variety of perspectives on complex and controversial issues. The extent of engagement and how you engage can be calibrated initially and adjusted over time based on your evaluation of the group and initial interactions.

- ▶ If agreeing to the request, plan an engagement strategy to discuss the request, and potential partnership in communicating your position publicly.

Engagement doesn't mean you agree with or endorse the group making the request. Engaging in a controlled and thoughtful way can limit the risk as well as set the stage for a respectful interaction, regardless the outcome.

Here are some guidelines for engagement:

- ✓ Be sure you've thoroughly researched the organization and individuals involved, and have considered the potential outcomes from engaging.

- ✓ Set ground rules and parameters upfront. Specify the amount of time, the number of participants and who they will be. If it is not a telephone conversation, meeting on “neutral ground” – not at either organization’s offices - can help create a balanced environment for an initial discussion.
- ✓ Before you meet, set your own objectives for the discussion. What do you hope to learn and to communicate? What information are you willing to share and importantly, what is off-limits, such as business strategies, cost of production or other financial information?
- ✓ During the conversation, be respectful and calm. Remain professional at all times.
- ✓ Listen with an open mind and look for common values as a starting point for understanding.
- ✓ Establish expectations and secure agreement on information sharing. Is your dialogue private and confidential, or can the group share that they are meeting and the content of the discussion? If they can share, with whom and in what format? Make sure expectations are clear and that continued dialogue depends on following the ground rules established.
- ✓ If the group is unwilling to engage on the basis you specify or if they deviate from the agreed-upon parameters, it may be appropriate to discontinue the engagement. Be prepared to respond to criticism for breaking off engagement and to explain your rationale to other stakeholders. Choosing to engage or not engage both come with risk of public criticism from various stakeholders. Be prepared to address such criticism as you work through the process.

GUIDANCE While speed is of the essence, you need to calibrate your response so you don’t escalate the issue by over-reacting. Likewise, waiting to see how it plays out risks losing the opportunity to shape the initial narrative, or be included in news stories or online discussions, and a second chance to comment rarely occurs. Weigh the risk of providing legitimacy and amplifying the campaign by responding against the potential for reputational harm from remaining quiet. Determining appropriate engagement varies with each situation, and is as much art as science. Utilizing internal and external public affairs or public relations experts can assist in analyzing the situation and determining the appropriate response.

If Engagement Fails....

At some point in this process you may decide not to engage with a group, that the engagement is not productive or the group may go public with criticism or a campaign despite ongoing discussion. In today’s social media-driven, 24-hour news cycle world, the window of opportunity to tell your story is very small. Having a response plan ready that positively communicates your position and anticipates their likely actions is essential and will allow you to quickly execute should it be necessary.

Response Plan

It's impractical to develop a response plan for every potential issue, but preparing some core materials in key areas will provide a framework for a rapid and strategic response, should it be needed.

- ▶ **MONITORING** You are likely already monitoring news and social media coverage of your company or brand. If the issue isn't currently on the monitoring radar, add it. If you are subject to a campaign or attack, you may need to increase the frequency of monitoring and modify your criteria for responding or engaging in online conversations.
- ▶ **MESSAGES/TALKING POINTS** Your proactive CSR or sustainability communications plan should provide positive messaging about your current sustainability commitment and progress. Create additional key messages about your engagement with stakeholders and willingness to listen and answer questions. Include messages that anticipate a scenario in which engagement with an advocacy group ends negatively.

For example:

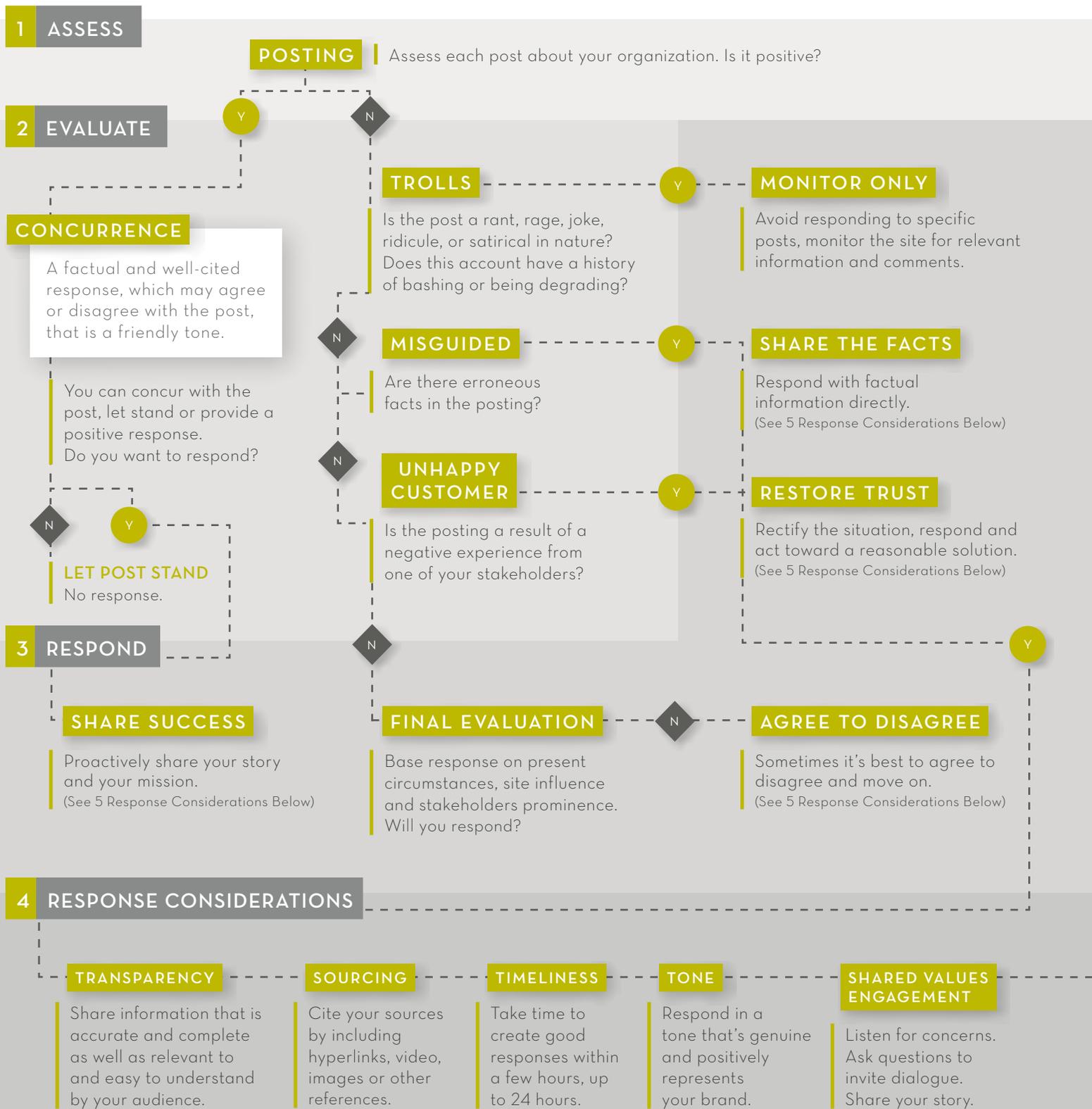
- *“Operating in a sustainable and responsible manner is core to our business and our values. Here’s what we are doing on this issue.”*
 - *“We appreciate (Group) raising our awareness on this issue. As we’ve communicated with (Group), we’re looking into the issue and how it impacts our existing sustainability strategy.”*
 - *“We’ve (met/spoken) with (Group) and explained what we are doing on this issue. It’s unfortunate they’ve decided to take a less collaborative approach. We’re committed to fully explore their concerns, and we have a long track record of working constructively with many organizations.”*
- ▶ **MEDIA STRATEGY** Your strategy for reaching out to or responding to media requests depends on the specific scenario and media outlet. As noted earlier, you rarely have a second chance to help shape the initial narrative, so at minimum making sure media has access to your sustainability messaging, and if appropriate, background on your interactions with the group can provide balance to their reporting. If a reporter learns you have been actively engaging with the group and are looking at the issue, it may positively impact their coverage. See the Traditional Media Engagement Response Decision Tree that follows for more information.

- ▶ **SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGY** Your proactive sustainability communications plan likely includes positive posts for your various social media properties and should be activated in case of an attack. A criteria and process for responding to social media conversations, as well as traditional media, should be in place in advance of an attack to allow quick decision-making to appropriately manage the conversation. Also consider what resources may be needed if the conversation is brought directly to your Facebook page or Twitter feed. If you choose to respond to posts, do you have enough people and internal resources to do it in a timely way? What are your options depending on volume and tenor of the conversations? Social media conversations don't stop at the end of the business day or week so weekend and evening monitoring and responses may be needed. See the Online Engagement Response Decision Tree that follows to assist in managing online interactions.
- ▶ **WEBSITE** A dedicated sustainability area on your website provides “always on” access for reporters and other stakeholders. Be sure the information is current and plan how the content can be highlighted on the homepage in the event of an attack or campaign. Consider developing “dark” pages or sites where you can stage information specific to an issue but not make it public until it is needed.



ONLINE ENGAGEMENT RESPONSE DECISION TREE

ONLINE ENGAGEMENT TIP Every organization should establish community guidelines or “house rules” for each of their social channels and websites. This encourages productive and appropriate participation and fosters a transparent community.



5 SHARED VALUES BEST PRACTICES

BE YOU

- ▶ State your name and position within the business.
- ▶ Share your personal connection to the topic of discussion.
- ▶ Acknowledge when you agree and share what's important to you about the topic - especially those topics for which the commenter showcases concern or interest

BE HONEST

- ▶ Acknowledge problems and mistakes.
- ▶ Where there have been mistakes, share how you will improve the situation.

BE PATIENT

- ▶ Understand that engagement online can be difficult.
- ▶ Be aware that even though negative commenters may be the majority of the conversation, there are far more individuals observing how you respond to the negativity.
- ▶ Your positive, patient engagement will send a signal to quiet observers that you are doing what's right, and trolls will tire of your good-tempered and calm approach.

BE CONSISTENT

- ▶ With every post, use a consistent tone and voice - don't veer off course for any one commenter.
- ▶ Keep focused on the purpose and objectives for your social media channels.
- ▶ When in doubt about how to respond, use your community guidelines to inform engagement. This may mean deleting posts or blocking commenters.

BE POSITIVE

- ▶ Respond in a friendly, upbeat, yet professional tone.
- ▶ Assume people are good until proven otherwise.
- ▶ Correct inaccuracies politely.
- ▶ Do not argue, insult or blame others.

BE HELPFUL

- ▶ Point users to valuable information on your website.
- ▶ Follow up with users when new information is available.
- ▶ Use third-party websites to supplement your content.

6 HOW TO AGREE TO DISAGREE

"I can tell safe food is something you're particularly concerned about - the same is true for me. That's why we <cite information specific to food safety protocols>."

"It's apparent to me that you care deeply for animals. I share that passion - and that's why I've chosen this career."

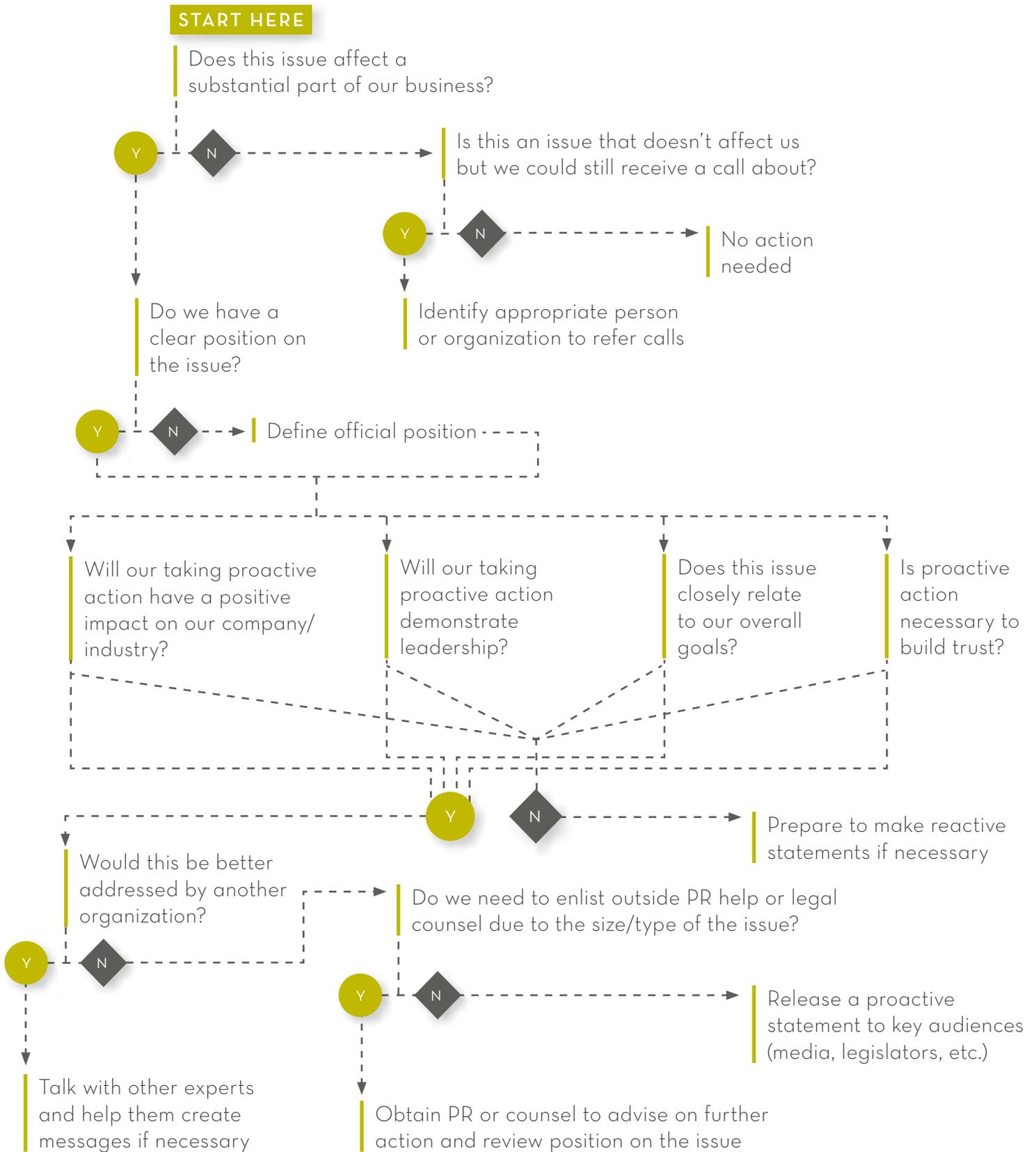
Find a common theme that is true for both you and the commenter and acknowledge that about which you both care. Do not ask additional questions or invite more dialogue with someone who is not interested in a conversation.

"I think we can both agree that the way <animals or crops> are raised today is very different than it was decades ago. I've been raising <animals or crops> for years, and while no system is perfect, we do everything we can to ensure they are well-cared for."

"Your passion is obvious. And while we may not agree fully, I can share your passion for <food product>."

"At the end of the day, we will have to agree to disagree on the subject of <topic>, but I'd like to reinforce that we remain committed to <healthy living/ progressive animal care/supporting our community/ environmental sustainability>."

TRADITIONAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT RESPONSE DECISION TREE



Resources

SUSTAINABILITY ORGANIZATIONS & PROGRAMS

- ▶ **American National Standard for Sustainable Agriculture**
<http://www.leonardoacademy.org/services/standards/agstandard.html>
- ▶ **B Corporation** <https://www.bcorporation.net/>
- ▶ **Conservation Technology Information Center**
<http://www.ctic.purdue.edu/CTIC%20HOME/ABOUT%20CTIC/>
- ▶ **Environmental Defense Fund Sustainable Supply Chains**
<http://business.edf.org/projects/featured/sustainable-supply-chains/>
- ▶ **Field to Market** <https://fieldtomarket.org/>
- ▶ **Global Reporting Institute** <https://www.globalreporting.org/Pages/default.aspx>
- ▶ **Global Environmental Management Initiative** <http://gemi.org/>
- ▶ **International Seafood Sustainability Foundation** <http://iss-foundation.org/>
- ▶ **National Dairy FARM Program** <http://www.nationaldairyfarm.com/>
- ▶ **Sustainable Agriculture Initiative** <http://www.saiplatform.org/>
- ▶ **Sustainability Accounting Standards Board** <https://www.sasb.org/>
- ▶ **Sustainable Seafood Coalition** <http://www.sustainableseafoodcoalition.org/>
- ▶ **U.S. Environmental Protection Agency** <https://www.epa.gov/sustainability/sustainability-resource-finder>
- ▶ **U.S. Roundtable for Sustainable Beef** <https://www.usrsb.org/>
- ▶ **University of Arkansas Center for Agricultural and Rural Sustainability** <http://cars.uark.edu/>
- ▶ **University of California, Davis Agricultural Sustainability Institute** <http://asi.ucdavis.edu/>
- ▶ **USDA Economic Research Service** <https://www.ers.usda.gov/>
- ▶ **USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture** <https://nifa.usda.gov/>
- ▶ **USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service** <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/site/national/home/>

COMMODITY/TRADE ASSOCIATIONS

An online directory of agriculture commodity organizations and trade associations can be found at

<https://www.agmrc.org/directories-state-resources/related-directories/national-commodity-and-agricultural-organization-sites>

If you need additional resources, please contact CFI. We're happy to connect you to organizations that have data to help inform your decision-making process.



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Contact The Center for Food Integrity for more information
at learnmore@foodintegrity.org or [816.880.5360](tel:816.880.5360)



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