



MAY 29, 2026

**FROM BASELINE TO ACTION:
A PRACTICAL SUSTAINABILITY SERIES BY PATH ZERO**

What is a Sustainability Baseline? And Why Do Retailers Care?

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What is a Sustainability Baseline? And Why Do Retailers Care?

If sustainability feels overwhelming, it's often because suppliers think they're expected to have answers already. In reality, the most important step is much simpler – and much more practical: understanding your current operational footprint.

That's what a sustainability baseline is.

A baseline is not a scorecard or a judgment. Rather, it's a clear-eyed snapshot of how your business operates today. Retailers care about baselines because progress, credibility and planning are impossible without one.



Comparison Can Be Constructive

In a formal sustainability audit, an operational baseline examines the full range of environmental and social impacts connected to how a business actually functions.

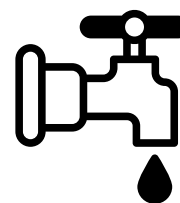
This typically includes:



**EMISSIONS AND
ENERGY**



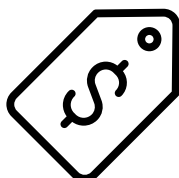
**BUILDINGS AND
EQUIPMENT**



**WASTE AND
WATER**



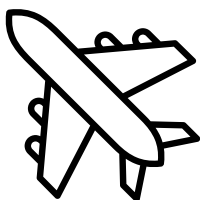
**SHIPPING AND
LOGISTICS**



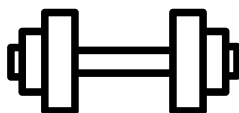
**SUPPLY CHAIN
AND PURCHASING**



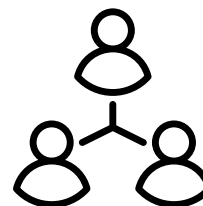
**PACKAGING AND
FINISHED GOODS**



**EMPLOYEE
TRAVEL**



RESILIENCE



**COMMUNITY
IMPACT**

The purpose isn't to expect complete data across every category. It's to establish visibility, understand what's known, what isn't and where the most meaningful impacts are likely to be. No supplier starts with perfect information, and retailers know that.

A Practical Starting Point: Scope 1, 2 and 3 Emissions

For suppliers who want to begin on their own, documenting Scope 1, 2 and 3 emissions is often the most effective entry point. Emissions accounting provides structure and creates a shared language that retailers already use.

Programs like [Shop! Path Zero Emissions](#) offer a practical way to define boundaries, organize data and begin documenting emissions without turning sustainability into a separate business function. Early data may be estimated or incomplete – and that’s acceptable. The goal is orientation, not precision.

Credibility Comes From Independence and Expertise

Credibility in sustainability reporting is strengthened when an independent third party conducts the audit. Third-party reviews add objectivity and consistency, and they signal seriousness to retailers and other stakeholders.

There is also clear value in having a sustainability consultant involved. An experienced, industry-specific expert will catch risks, impacts and opportunities that internal reviews often miss – not because internal teams aren’t capable, but because sustainability cuts across operations, procurement, logistics, facilities and strategy in ways most organizations were never designed to connect.

The Baseline Becomes the Foundation

A sustainability baseline is not an end in itself. It becomes the reference point for everything that follows.

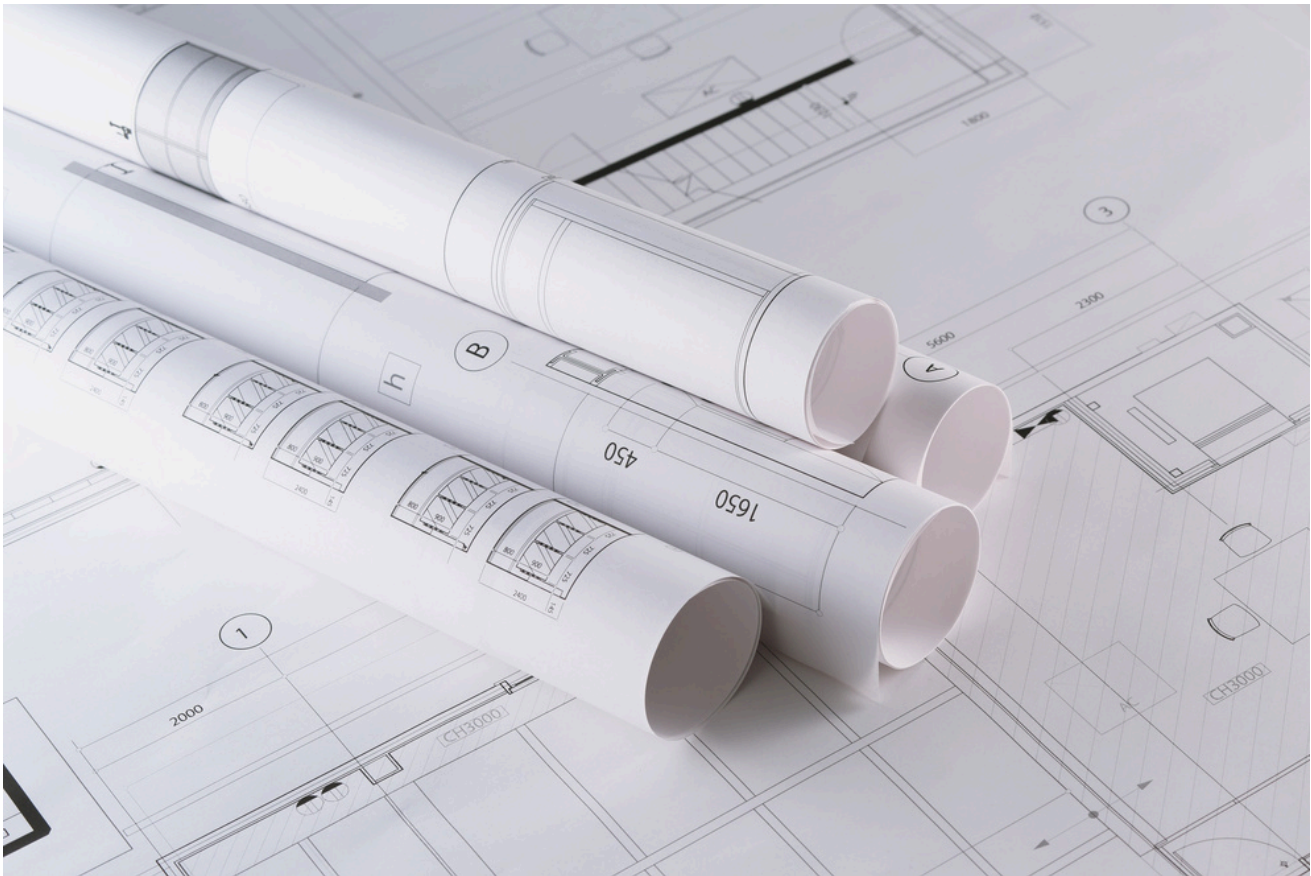
The baseline informs a sustainability policy by grounding commitments in real operations rather than aspirational language. It also provides the factual foundation for an Environmental Management System (EMS), where responsibilities, procedures, tracking and continuous improvement are formalized over time.

In other words, the baseline answers where you are, so policies and management systems can responsibly define where you’re going.

Transparency Still Matters More Than Completeness

Even with third-party support, gaps will remain. Retailers expect that. What matters is being clear about what's included, what's estimated and what's still out of scope.

A sustainability baseline isn't the finish line. It's the foundation – the point where sustainability shifts from abstract to manageable. Retailers know this, and they're far more interested in learning with suppliers than evaluating them from a distance. ◀





ABOUT PATH ZERO

Shop! Association offers a suite of Path Zero sustainability programs designed to help members document, track, and improve performance—building credible, measurable results across operations and projects.

Path Zero Emissions: An easy-to-use platform for tracking Scope 1, 2, and 3 emissions—capturing utilities, waste, water, and operational data in alignment with the GHG Protocol for reporting needs, including California SB 253.

Path Zero Element: Transforms architectural drawings and specifications into material quantities and embodied carbon—capturing store-specific variations across design, fixtures, and displays for scalable, repeatable reporting.

Path Zero Benchmark: Evaluates sustainability performance across 135 qualitative and quantitative data points—delivering industry benchmarking and recognized ratings supported by third-party assurance.

Path Zero Consulting: Provides hands-on support for sustainability strategy, facility and program audits, target setting, and implementation planning.

Each program can be used independently or together, depending on your organization's goals and reporting needs.

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ABOUT SHOP! ASSOCIATION

Shop!, the global trade association dedicated to enhancing retail environments and experiences, embraces a culture of inclusion where diverse voices are active in all aspects of our organization. This supports an environment in which all individuals feel respected and are treated fairly, and different viewpoints, opinions, thoughts, and ideas are encouraged and embraced. We proudly maintain the highest standards of ethics and transparency.

Our Purpose: Empowering our members to innovate at retail.

Our Mission: From ideation through implementation, Shop will engage our diverse array of members with education, insights and events that enable them to co-create innovation that evolves retail worldwide.

Our Vision: Shop's members will shape the evolution of retail.

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