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

**From Baseline to Policy:
Why a Sustainability Policy
Should Come Second – and
Be Built Alongside an EMS**

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From Baseline to Policy: Why a Sustainability Policy Should Come Second – and Be Built Alongside an EMS

When suppliers begin engaging with sustainability, there's often pressure to put a policy in place quickly. Policies feel tangible, signal seriousness and they're requested by retailers frequently. However, a sustainability policy is only effective when it's grounded in reality – which is why a sustainability baseline should always come first.

A Policy Without a Baseline Is Just Aspirational Language

A sustainability policy is meant to describe how an organization intends to manage its impacts and improve over time. Without a baseline, those intentions are disconnected from day-to-day operations.

When policies are written before understanding current conditions, they tend to be vague, overly broad or borrowed from elsewhere. They may sound good, but they don't guide decisions – and they're difficult to implement consistently.

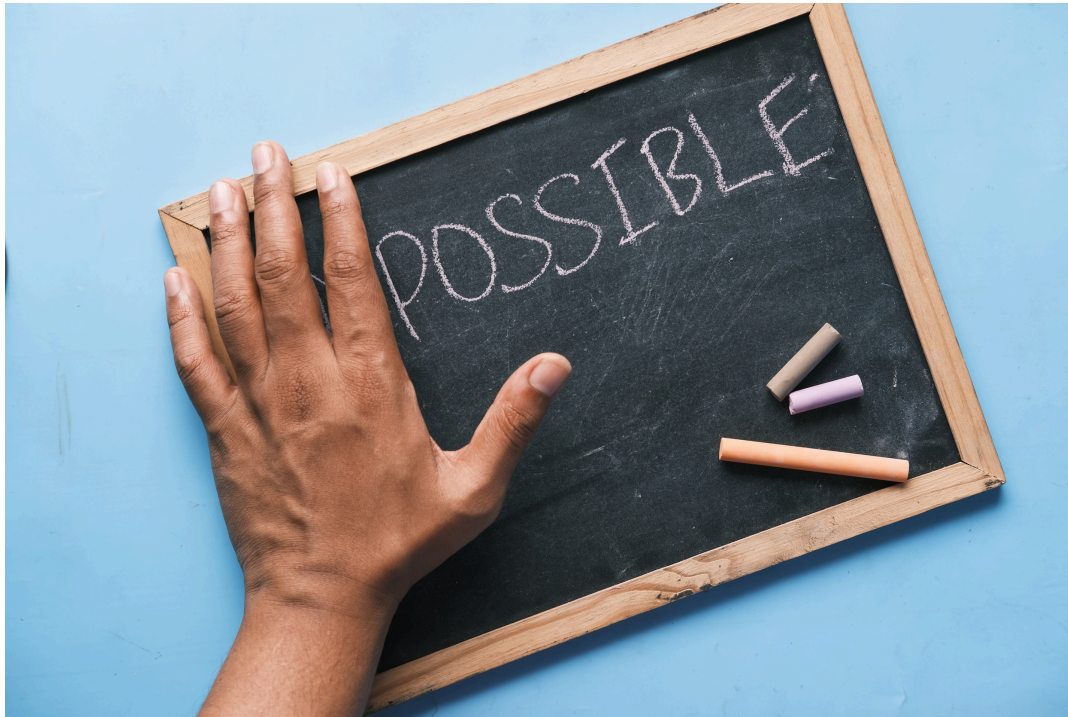
Retailers recognize this. A shorter, grounded policy that reflects real operations carries far more credibility than a polished statement that isn't anchored in data.

Policies Set Direction, Not Perfection

One of the biggest concerns suppliers have is that a sustainability policy will lock them into commitments they aren't ready to meet. In practice, a good policy does the opposite.

A strong sustainability policy:

- Acknowledges the current state
- Sets direction for improvement
- Leaves room for learning and adjustment



Policies are not meant to promise immediate transformation. They are meant to clarify intent, establish priorities and create internal alignment. Retailers understand that progress happens over time, and they value realistic commitments far more than ambitious but unworkable ones. When policies are grounded in an actual baseline, they become useful tools rather than intimidating documents.

The Baseline Keeps the Work Honest

A sustainability baseline shows where impacts actually occur – whether that’s materials, energy use, transportation, packaging, purchased goods and services or operations. This visibility keeps sustainability focused on what matters most to the business.

It prevents overcommitting, helps prioritize effort and ensures sustainability doesn’t become theoretical. The baseline answers where you are, which is essential before defining where you’re going.

Why Policies and EMS Are Often Built Together

Once a baseline exists, sustainability policies and Environmental Management Systems (EMS) are often drafted together – and for good reason. They inform each other.

The policy sets direction: what the organization commits to managing and improving. The EMS defines how that commitment shows up in practice: responsibilities, procedures, tracking and review.

Developing them together makes sustainability implementation realistic at all levels of the organization. The policy reflects what the EMS can reasonably support, and the EMS is designed to deliver on the policy – not struggle to interpret it later.

This alignment is what turns sustainability from a statement into a manageable business discipline.

Retailers Value the Progression

Retailers are less interested in whether every element is fully mature today than whether the progression makes sense. A documented baseline, followed by a thoughtful policy and a right-sized EMS built to support it, signals seriousness – even if the program is still evolving.

Sustainability doesn't start with statements. It starts with understanding. When suppliers let the baseline lead and build policies and systems that reinforce each other, sustainability becomes part of how the business operates – not something layered on top of it. ◀



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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