

SUSTAINABILITY POLICY: PLAIN LANGUAGE

The Background

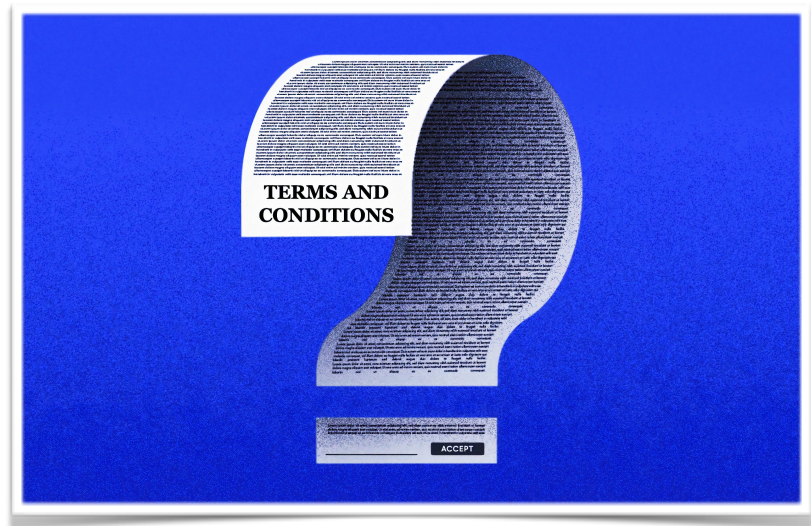
A large, multinational manufacturing company was sending its lengthy sustainability policies down the supply chain to ensure compliance with the company's sustainability goals.

The Challenge

The vendors – most of which were not native English speakers – were struggling to comprehend the lengthy and densely written policy document written in English-language legalese.

The Request

"We need to make sure that our supply chain understands our expectations for sustainability, but the Legal department won't let us replace or rewrite the policy."

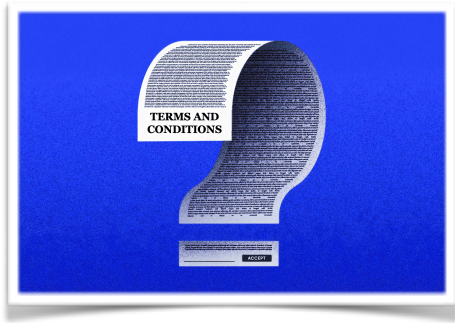


The First Step

Policy documents, by nature, are dense. Often written or heavily influenced by attorneys, they use complex language that is challenging for a native speaker, let alone for someone with less language proficiency.

The process began with conversations with the Legal and Supply Chain teams to identify areas of improvement. Supply Chain leadership wanted to improve clarity, either through plain language or translation. The Legal department wanted to maintain an English-only document to ensure that all legal considerations were comprehensively addressed.

Both sides felt like they had reached an impasse.



What Changed?

- The new policy document improved outcomes, helping the company develop a more compelling sustainability story for its stakeholders.
- A balance was established between formal legal guidelines and plain language text that was easier for non-native speakers to understand.
- Vendor compliance improved by 48% over the previous year.
- It made it easy to distinguish between language barrier-based vendor confusion and true noncompliance.

The Company

Revenue: \$1 billion

Employees: 5,000

Industry: Manufacturing

Image is by Morning Brew via Unsplash.com.

The Structure

In an effort to meet both departments' needs – and ultimately, the needs of the company as a whole – a new document structure was developed.

With the new structure, the left column of the document briefly summarized each section in plain language, while the right column retained the full legal text that the attorneys required.

For example, while the right column contained 200 words, the right column could simply say, "We do not tolerate slave labor." These phrases were clear, and easy to paste into a translation app if there was any question as to the meaning.

The Result

The new policy document was issued to suppliers in January. When the company conducted its next supply chain audit in September, compliance had improved by 48% over the previous year.

This increase gave the company a good supply chain sustainability story to tell to its stakeholders, and helped to quickly identify and replace noncompliant vendors.

The company is now well on its way to meeting its long-term sustainability targets, which are based on the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).