



The pitfalls of enablement and how to avoid them

Telecoms operators provide enabling technology to help their customers reduce carbon emissions. However, exaggerating claims of enablement may have adverse consequences. This article explores how telecoms operators should approach these claims.

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The telecoms industry is grappling with sustainability

As one of the key issues of our time, businesses across the globe are grappling with what it truly means to be sustainable as they transition to net zero emissions.

The telecoms industry has been part of the action; disclosing carbon emissions, making net zero commitments, and providing the enabling technology for their customers to reduce emissions. However, enablement is only part of the picture, and by making clumsy claims around enablement, operators face potential pitfalls.

This article examines these pitfalls and offers guidance to operators on addressing these in a practical, tangible way.

What is enablement?

What is meant by enablement in the context of sustainability? As the term might suggest, it is the ability to support a reduction in customers' emissions by providing the right technology, products or services. A good example is this report published by the GSMA which provides a view on the GHG emission-reduction possibilities that mobile communication technologies enable. According to OECD statistics on Greenhouse Gas Emissions, the enabling impact of the telecoms industry in 2018 was estimated to be around 2,135 million tonnes of 'CO₂ equivalent' greenhouse gases (CO₂E). The GSMA article states that, in contrast, the industry itself was responsible for approximately 220 MtCO₂e, so a positive offset of approximately tenfold.

The report goes on to note that emissions in buildings, transport, manufacturing, and energy sectors can be avoided through leveraging energy efficient technologies that aid consumption reduction. For example, the telecoms industry can reduce transport emissions by providing telematics technology to help optimise route (and therefore vehicle fuel) efficiency.

Individual operators, vendors and analysts have produced similar studies (including STL Partners). Stating the potentially positive enabling capabilities of telecoms services is a valid and valuable exercise. However, it is not without pitfalls.

How to approach enablement

In and of itself, enablement is a positive thing if a company's products and services are genuinely able to contribute to reduced emissions. But it is only part of the picture. Before making these claims, here are four recommendations for navigating what can be a complex landscape:

Acknowledge others

When making claims about enablement, it's important to acknowledge the entire system that makes positive contributions possible. By definition, enablement leads only to secondary benefits, so telcos must be careful to avoid overclaiming responsibility. For example, by using IoT technology for smart energy systems, an entire ecosystem of partners plays a role in the related emission reduction. The device manufacturers, the energy services supplier, the software solution providers, and the end user, are at least as important as the telco in this scenario. Telcos must be wary of exaggerating their impact by positioning themselves as the sole contributor when 'claiming' enablement benefits.

Take a balanced approach

If telcos are willing to claim the secondary benefits of enablement as their own, they must also be prepared to accept the adverse impacts their own industry is responsible for. Acknowledging areas where they can do better can help to avoid reporting bias. For example, encouraging business and enterprise customers to upgrade their handsets every year has damaging environmental consequences (particularly since embedded carbon accounts for over 80% of the emissions arising from smartphones). Any telco making enablement claims must also be careful to point out their internal shortcomings and make it clear that they are also seeking to address these.

Ensure claims are accurate

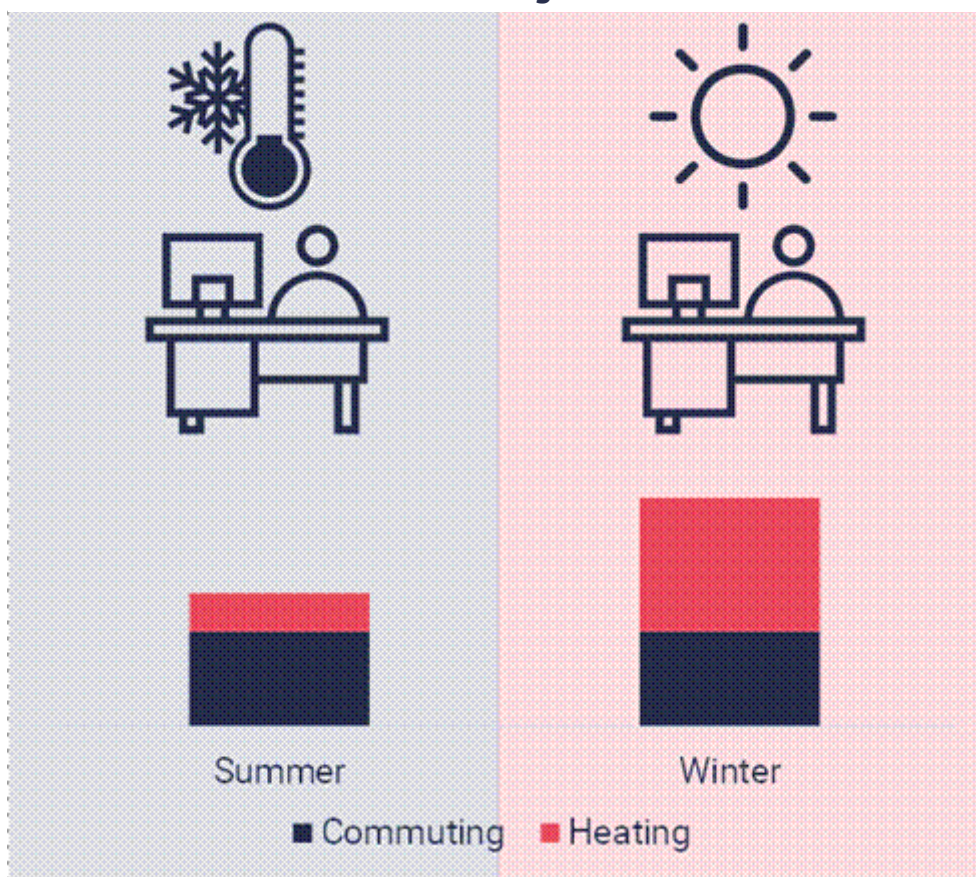
In a piece of research conducted by the World Resources Institute (WRI) into claims of avoided emissions made by over 300 companies, the WRI found that most claims did not provide the necessary information to back up credibility claims. While this research looked at other industries besides telecoms, it is nonetheless a warranted reminder to those looking to make enablement claims. Ensure reporting covers scope 1, 2 and 3 emissions to make external validation possible, and bolster credibility.

For example, operators often reference working from home as an example of enabling reduced emissions. By providing the connectivity for remote workers to collaborate with their colleagues from the comfort of their own home, this reduces the volume of people commuting into the office and therefore the associated carbon footprint. But this is only part of the picture. Research conducted by WSP UK looked at the carbon output of 200 WSP employees commuting to work combined with home/office heating. The study found that there was only a reduction in overall emissions in the summer – in winter, the amount of carbon emitted from home heating systems was actually greater than the amount produced from the commute. Furthermore, a paper published in Environmental Research Letters synthesised 39 studies across different regions, and found that working from home could potentially increase overall emissions for some of the following reasons:

- Teleworkers moving further away from their offices and therefore making longer commutes on the days they do work in the office
- Time saved from commuting may be spent on leisure activities that also involve carbon emitting activities
- Other members of the household making trips in a car that would otherwise have been in use for commuting

Often, claims of reduced emissions are only part of a wider picture that may be obscured when operators seek to shore up their claims of enablement.

Working from home can actually increase overall carbon emissions when accounting for seasonal factors



Source: STL Partners

Do it for the right reasons to avoid backlash

Given the current ubiquity of corporate messaging around sustainability, it can be tempting to point to enablement as proof of one's own green credentials. But any such claims

should be made for the right reasons – to inspire, motivate, and encourage the right behaviours. Otherwise, telcos can run the risk of attracting adverse attention and being accused of greenwashing by jumping on the sustainability bandwagon as part of their marketing and/or public relations.

In practice, some telcos (and others too) are careful not to attract this level of scrutiny and instead are careful not to make too many bold claims on emissions, even when they have good grounds to do so. However, by ensuring the intention behind the sustainability and enablement claims are genuine, and the information is accurate, telcos can place themselves in the best possible position.

Moving forwards

In summary, enablement can be a positive force in the race towards net zero. However, claims around enablement should be genuine, provable, and balanced. For telcos seeking to strengthen their green credentials, bold claims around enablement should also be tempered by an acknowledgement of the entire ecosystem involved, as well as the other, internal, measures they can take to truly foster a more sustainable future. Finally, some recognition that there may also be instances of negative ‘dis’-enablement would build trust.

How STL Partners Sustainability practice can support you

Tackling climate change has moved to the top of everyone’s agenda. This includes the telecoms industry. Operators and their partners are committing to reduce their carbon footprints over the next decade: in many cases to net zero.

Sustainability is a key component of the Co-ordination Age: STL’s vision for the future of telecoms. Through our research, consulting and participation in telco sustainability events we share best practice, insights and supporting rationale for the industry to accelerates its transition.

Get in touch to understand how STL Partners can support you: grace.donnelly@stlpartners.com

Or visit STL Partners’ Sustainability hub

www.stlpartners.com/telecoms-sustainability