



Rebecca Pardon investigates the shift from communicating climate mitigation to adaptation strategies

Vienna's elegant architecture is worn proudly by the city, an indication of its historic appreciation for the arts. Its stately streets, once at the centre of the Habsburg empire, are lined with palaces and baroque masterpieces. Though a traditionally conservative city, the region is, nevertheless, experiencing change. During the summer months, a thick heat often blankets Vienna, causing so-called "heat days" that force residents to cram essentials into car boots and seek refuge, and fresh air, in the countryside.

To alleviate the discomfort, initiatives are being introduced across the city to help it adapt to a new climate. "Cool straßen" (cool streets), winding beneath thick canopies of leaves, treat pedestrians to welcome pools of shade, water fountains and machines that cloak them in a gentle mist. Matthias Ratheiser, CEO at Vienna-based research firm Weatherpark, which specialises in urban climatology, is growing increasingly doubtful about the world's chances of reducing CO₂ emissions in the near future, describing mitigation efforts as "futile." Instead, he says, the focus should be on adaptation. This scepticism is not unfounded. This year, the world watched as parts of southern California were left charred by wildfires in what would be the costliest natural disaster in American history. It is difficult to believe that, in previous years, the same region faced record-breaking rainfall and snow.

As well as arid summers, Austria has been plagued by severe flooding. Last year, the state of Lower Austria, which surrounds the capital, declared itself a "catastrophe region" as riverbanks burst and basements filled, washing away livelihoods and leaving houses precariously perched on treacherous terrains. Ratheiser is helping the city to take proactive measures to adapt and is candid about the need for urgent action. "Climate change mitigation is a global effort, but that effort isn't happening fast enough. So, we need to focus on adaptation, and that can be a local or regional level."

Ratheiser believes that as climate risks become more immediate and tangible, people will feel a

greater urgency to act. "That's a huge difference because adaptation can be successfully done at the local scale. If I want to adapt the city of Vienna to climate change, I don't need the EU, the UN, China or the USA. I can do it myself."

Climate adaptation should be a priority not only for cities, but also for businesses. While pledges to reduce carbon emissions and water consumption across operations and supply chains are essential, they merely prevent a worse future rather than address the inevitable consequences of the damage already baked in. Forward thinking is essential to any successful business in order to anticipate risks and public companies, which can have environmental activists among their shareholders, are often probed with pesky questions about climate. Additionally, regulators expect firms to get to grips with big problems, so the responsibility does not fall into laps of government.

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Many businesses remain unprepared however, preferring to occupy themselves with short-term priorities. A report last year by ratings agency S&P Global found only one-fifth of companies could disclose a climate adaptation plan, and less than half are planning to implement their adaptation strategies within the next decade.

Some companies, however, are taking strides in climate adaptation. Thames Water, Britain's biggest water utility company, is contending with more

erratic weather patterns in and around London, forcing the company to manage more deluges and droughts. To ensure adequate water supply as far off as 2100, Thames has mapped out a series of “adaptive pathways” which depend on changing climate, demography and the economy. These investments have been informed by exhaustive planning and forecasting, using low-, medium- and high-emissions scenarios for the 2020s, 2050s and 2080s.

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Consumer goods company Unilever, often held up as a pioneer in sustainable business practices, has sought to quantify the likely impact of climate change on its operations by 2030, 2040 and 2050 under different regulatory scenarios and temperature increases. Similarly, Nestlé is investing in supply chain resilience by diversifying its sourcing regions to mitigate the risks posed by extreme weather. IKEA is adapting its infrastructure and retail locations to withstand flooding and rising temperatures. Meanwhile, brands such as Patagonia and Nike are developing climate-resilient materials and innovative designs to future-proof their products.

Despite these efforts, the politics of corporate climate adaptation remains complex and volatile, as businesses navigate regulatory pressures, investor expectations and public scrutiny. In the EU, regulations like the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) require companies to disclose climate risk mitigation and adaptation efforts, compelling firms to formalise their resilience strategies. In contrast, the US has seen a backlash against ESG (environmental, social and governance) policies, with some political groups opposing corporate climate initiatives. During his first few weeks in office, Donald Trump vowed to halt all offshore wind projects, signalling a rollback of environmental regulation.

Alice Hill, former climate adviser to Barack Obama and now a fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, notes that there has been a retreat from ESG priorities in the US. “We are seeing a removal of the words ‘climate change’ from key government documents and a determination to undo efforts to mitigate emissions introduced by the previous administration,” she says. “Similarly, there isn’t a strong emphasis on resilience or adaptation under this administration.

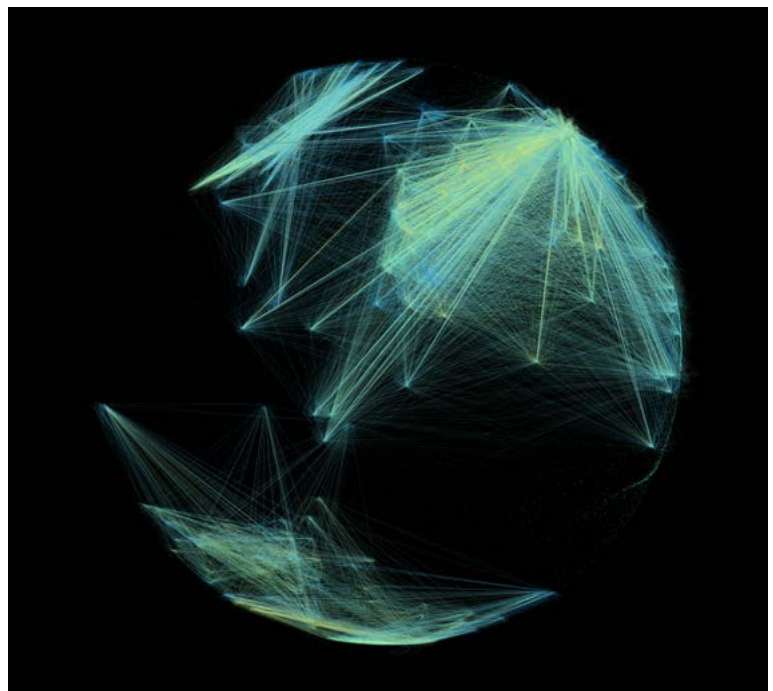
However, given that wildfires, droughts and storms are becoming more severe across the country, there is a growing recognition of the need for resilience.”

Amid this federal pushback, banks and asset managers including BlackRock, JPMorgan and Goldman Sachs have pulled out of the Net Zero Asset Managers initiative and the Net Zero Banking Alliance, though all have said they remain committed to their climate goals. Hill, however, believes many of these firms are merely adjusting their language rather than abandoning their commitments altogether. “It doesn’t mean they’re stopping; they’re just not publicising it. They must be extremely careful because if they are sued, they need to prove compliance with anti-ESG laws,” she says.

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Dan Saccardi, programme director at sustainable investor group Ceres, agrees that while corporate climate messaging may be shifting, the underlying strategies remain unchanged. “There is certainly a transition away from a federal focus, but in private discussions, we are not seeing a fundamental change in corporate strategy,” he explains. “Companies are reassessing how they frame their efforts rather than altering their approach.

“I think companies are rightly looking at how they are framing what they’re doing, possibly shifting tactics; not shifting underlying strategy, but shifting how they communicate that. And there are benefits to that,” he continues. “I think the sustainability community has over the past several years been talking to itself more than is ideal and using jargon and terminology that resonates among the community, but not among the broader public.” Shifting tactics



and reframing communications strategies can be delicate, however. Sian Conway-Wood, founder of sustainability news platform #EthicalHour, observes that risks arise when companies move from climate mitigation communications to climate adaptation. “A lot of greenwashing scandals stem from communications teams overstating claims, sometimes without fully realising the legal implications,” she explains. “It’s encouraging that businesses are leading in this space, but sustainability can’t just be left to PR; it needs to be embedded across departments.”

“So, it is great that they are taking a leading role, but it can’t just be left to the communications department. I think, historically, it has been more of a CSR exercise and, now that it is moving into the boardroom in a different way, we are breaking down those silos.”

The language around sustainability is indeed changing. Companies like Unilever, HSBC and BP are increasingly using “resilience” instead of “adaptation” to frame their climate strategies as proactive rather than reactive. While “adaptation” may imply passive response, “resilience” implies strength, long-term planning and promises business continuity. Unilever, for example, emphasises “building climate-resilient supply chains” to navigate extreme weather risks in its reports, aligning with investor expectations and avoiding perceptions that adaptation implies a retreat from mitigation. “It is in companies’ best interests to position their sustainability strategies in ways that align with broader business goals,” Saccardi says.

With a more proactive approach to climate, it is possible that more transparent and candid communications will follow. Alison Taylor, clinical associate professor at NYU Stern School of Business and senior advisor at consultancy BSR, believes that while companies are unlikely to abandon their climate commitments, they must reconsider how they communicate them. “Physical reality still exists, climate change is real and how companies talk about it has become an even bigger challenge for communications professionals,” she says. “I don’t think any business is giving up on climate change because the Trump administration doesn’t like it. Expect to see more honest communication: how to reflect complicated efforts that may or may not be going well, rather than just focusing on all the wonderful things they’re doing.”

“I think we would expect to see less discussion about ESG and sustainability as broad terms, and more discussion about specific things the company is doing, in terms risk or mitigation, impact or innovation.”

Saccardi agrees that there is an innovation opportunity in climate adaptation, and this optimistic and forward-thinking perspective should be reflected in communications today. “I think at the end of

the day, there is a lot of business opportunity in enabling a smooth transition on the mitigation side and helping the private sector, as well as civil society and broader communities, prepare for and harden resources against some of the more severe impacts that we will start to be seeing on the adaptation side.”

Ultimately, the choice at hand is to either reduce carbon emissions or proceed with business-as-usual. While the latter may bring a temporary relief in shrugging off responsibility and basking in our sultrier summers, doing nothing will lead to an acceleration in climate change and unfathomable damage to our planet and communities.

For businesses approaching this quandary from an economic perspective, and from a risk management perspective, this should be a no-brainer. Karen Richards, former sustainability communications director at Unilever, believes companies have a role in “pushing the conversation forward”. She explains: “Investing in technology and innovation is key. We need to communicate progress, not just the end result. Without highlighting progress along the way, we won’t move fast enough to reach the necessary impact.”

“Unless we talk about some of those as the progress is happening, we’re just not going to move as fast to reach the impact or the end goals. Although, for communications professionals, that can be a bit nerve wracking.”

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Ratheiser observes that in Vienna, it is characteristic of the city to be opposed to change and stubborn in its ways, musing that in Austria’s recent elections, the programmes for the economy were anachronistic, reminiscent of “the economy of the last century”. But such stubbornness is not unique to Austrians; climate adaptation strategies should have been invested into globally long ago, rather than waiting for disasters to arrive on our newsfeeds. “People fear change because they are afraid that they will miss something they have now,” Ratheiser says. “I don’t cry about the lost battle against climate change, but instead I will concentrate my abilities on adaptation. I’ve decided to shift my attention from the lost battle to the one that’s still going on.”