


Effective Green Marketing Strategies on Social Media: Selling Companies and Their
Consumers on Investing in Carbon Offsetting and Solar Energy in 2021

By
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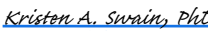
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ABSTRACT

In a digital world where consumers and businesses alike care significantly about sustainability and corporate social responsibility (CSR), the success of startup companies hinges on constant, clear, and thoughtful communication. Through my research into successfully marketing such concerns on social media as well as my internship at Clearloop, I discovered some of the best ways to convince both companies and consumers that preserving the planet should be a primary concern for every environmentally conscious company. Companies that ignore their impacts on the environment are synonymous with companies doomed to fail in the 21st century. Clearloop's model of partnering with companies to coordinate investment in and construction of solar energy encourages consumers of said companies while allowing Clearloop to take the wheel in terms of planning and building renewable energy infrastructure. What results are successful projects, the first of which being in Jackson, TN, that grant enterprises with the right to boast a commitment to preserving the planet through carbon offsetting.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

B2B	Business-to-Business
B2C	Business-to-Consumer
B2B2C	Business-to-Business-to-Consumer
CO ₂	Carbon Dioxide
CO ₂ e	Carbon Dioxide-Equivalent
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
DCI	Distressed Communities Index
DIY	Do It Yourself
eWOM	e-Word of Mouth
FYP	For You Page
GHG	Greenhouse Gases
IGTV	Instagram TV
PCE	Perceived Consumer Effectiveness
PV	Photovoltaic
ROI	Return on Investment
SMM	Social Media Marketing
TCAT	Tennessee College of Applied Technology
UGC	User-Generated Content
VR	Virtual Reality

BACKGROUND

Clearloop, a Nashville startup that was founded in January 2020, set out with the goal of giving companies the ability to attach a carbon offset to their products. After trial, errors, and experimentation, Clearloop pivoted its focus from product marketing to providing companies with the means to offset company-wide carbon emissions through the construction of solar energy. During my internship with Clearloop, I learned how they found success partnering with companies to offset GHG emissions through the production of solar energy and how marketing their actions on social media gave their partners' consumers and stakeholders the knowledge and confidence to understand the real actions being taken to help preserve the environment.

I began my internship in May 2021 as a social media marketing intern. My primary responsibilities were shooting and editing any videos that were posted across the Clearloop platforms. Additionally, as the internship went on, I helped with miscellaneous projects company-wide, including copywriting; outreach to podcasts to have the CEO Laura as a guest; and even helping design custom Clearloop-branded virtual reality (VR) goggles for the groundbreaking of the first solar field in Jackson, TN. To me, the culmination of all the work I put in during my internship was shooting video for the Jackson, TN, solar field groundbreaking. That was an all-day project for which I drove to Jackson and helped set up the event in the middle of the grassy field where, one day, the solar panels would generate electricity. I filmed the set-up process, a press conference at

the nearby Tennessee College of Applied Technology (TCAT) Jackson, and the formal proceedings of the groundbreaking.

This internship taught me what it's like to work in the fast-paced world of marketing for a startup who, for many reasons, stood out from the competition. Renewable energy, which I didn't know much about before going into the internship, is a field to which many companies and governments worldwide are looking to help preserve our planet. My job, then, was helping break down that information and deliver it to consumers of partner companies across the Clearloop social media channels in ways that were digestible and easy to understand.

Clearloop is just one carbon offset-focused company among many. It set itself apart, though, by taking appropriate risks with social media marketing (SMM) strategies, teaching consumers what they need to know about clean energy, and speaking with a consistent, educational, and upbeat brand voice that aligns with its values across all channels.

INTRODUCTION

The generation of energy for the purposes of human success has been a necessary undertaking for communities across the globe for centuries. Since the discovery of the possibility of such generation through harnessing the power of the sun in 1839, much of the efforts and research around solar energy have had the primary themes of making the infrastructure cheaper and more efficient (Jones & Bouamane, 2012, p. 3). Moreover, as what started as a fascinating invention transitioned into a technology that could help nations fight off the consequences of climate change, solar energy has become a necessary tool of the present and future. Through the end of the 20th century and into the 21st, as social media emerged and companies turned their eyes to the internet, communication became faster than ever before. What this meant for the future of solar energy, then, was that the information became available in the hands of many and most around the world. This increased awareness of the harmful effects that burning fossil fuels has on the Earth began giving consumers the tools to hold companies and corporations to a higher standard, one with clean energy as a focal point (Pain, 2017). Burning fossil fuels to generate electricity – the longtime primary production method – releases greenhouse gases (GHG), the most prevalent of which being carbon dioxide (CO₂), that trap in heat and make Earth warmer. Consumers and stakeholders alike of companies big and small began to take notice and hold them accountable to the harmful consequences their actions were having on the environment. One way to do so was

through carbon offsetting – a reduction of GHG emissions used to accommodate for emissions elsewhere. Carbon credits can be purchased between entities that produce offsets and companies looking to offset emissions, and these carbon credits are certified by governments or independent organizations to represent one ton of CO₂ (GHG Management Institute, 2020). So, companies began to form that were dedicated to giving more attention to renewable energy production methods that result in carbon offsets and do not generate GHG emissions, and one such enterprise was Clearloop.

The marketing strategies employed by Clearloop during my internship were very focused on social media. Clearloop stands out among its competitors due in equal parts to its model of business-to-business-to-consumer (B2B2C) marketing; the fact that Clearloop is a startup; and that they're doing it in the U.S. South, a region of the country where the sun shines brightest yet communities with access to renewable energy are few and far between.

There are three main points that Clearloop executed well that apply to all green-focused companies today: 1) taking risks with the brand on social media when it comes to setting the company apart from competitors; 2) being consistent with teaching consumers about the company and industry while making no assumptions about what they already know; and 3) making the values that uphold the brand voice central in all messaging and allowing that voice to drive any content created for the company.

My internship taught me how to find success on social media – namely on the new platform, TikTok – and much of that comes from experimentation. In its three years of existence, Clearloop has never shied away from throwing a lot at the wall to see what sticks. This, I believe, is what makes them a successful company, and these are the

reasons that Clearloop has been able to convince corporations big and small to care about both a commitment to clean energy and distressed communities in the South.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Part 1: The History of Solar Energy and Carbon Offsetting

To fully grasp where Clearloop stands in the big picture of renewable energy and carbon offsets, one must know how technology in those areas has progressed up to this point. Energy and power, as most understand it today, is likely synonymous with electricity. However, that was not always necessarily the case. The most prominent early source of power on Earth was flowing water. What was first used with water mills to drive grindstones turned into a power source used in many ways to enhance productivity in all areas, including agriculture and processed goods. Energy through water, though, was controlled by those who owned the land with access to the water. Centuries later, along came the first windmills, which, weather permitting, gave more people access to more power (Pain, 2017).

The first energy revolution occurred with the switch from burning wood to coal. By the 18th century, many developed communities worldwide landed somewhere among coal and charcoal as the most prevalent sources of energy. In 1769, James Watt invented and patented the steam engine. Many incorrectly conclude that this invention was a harbinger of the Industrial Revolution, but that notion oversimplifies the period and neglects other important advancements. Wind power, for example, became quite

successful at this time as many in the United States expanding westward needed power for basic tasks (Cleveland, 2004, pp. 554-555).

By the end of the 19th century, thanks to the work of innovators such as Thomas A. Edison, George Westinghouse, Charles Parsons, William Stanley, and Nikola Tesla, the electric power transmission system was solidified into a more primitive version of the one on which we rely today. Since then, engineers and electricians worldwide have been working on expanding such infrastructure to satisfy the growing consumption of electricity by societies (Cleveland, 2004, p. 556). What started as a method to power simple incandescent lighting grew and grew with each adoption of use for electricity in the commercial and residential sectors.

So, even with the relatively new steam engine method of bringing electricity to homes and businesses, research was being conducted into other forms of energy. Edmond Becquerel was the first to discover a process known as the photovoltaic (PV) effect, the basis of solar energy to this day, that produces electricity when exposed to light (Chu & Tarazano, 2019). He was a nineteen-year-old French experimental physicist who inspired another French researcher, August Mouchot, who in 1878 invented and patented a solar-powered steam engine (Jones & Bouamane, 2012, p. 3). In America, inventor Charles Fritts created a solar cell that generated an energy conversion rate of 1 to 2 percent. For context, modern cells work at an efficiency of 15 to 20 percent, but Fritts' accomplishment marked the beginning of the road toward modern solar energy generation in America – that being PV (Chu & Tarazano, 2019).

The next major accomplishment in solar energy came in the 1950s with the silicon solar cell, a material that replaced Fritts' selenium-based invention due to its

increased efficiency (now up to 6 percent). Daryl Chaplin, Calvin Fuller, and Gerald Pearson of Bell Laboratories were the inventors of this new technology, and although it was seen as inaccessible by many, this became the foundation for solar energy generation today (Chu & Tarazano, 2019). For the United States, a national realization of the toll the most common method of energy production – the combustion of fossil fuels – was taking on the environment occurred beginning in the 1970s. In 1974, the U.S. Congress passed the Solar Energy Research Development and Demonstration Act. While funding for the program was moderate, it signaled government interest in clean energy (Jones & Bouamane, 2012, p. 18). Between then and now, the government has created grants and tax incentives to promote solar research and implementation, and the cost to build and install solar panels has gone down.

It is important to note the role that GHG or carbon offsets played in the development of the strengthened importance of renewable energy development through the past several decades. A carbon offset is “a way for a company or person to reduce the level of carbon dioxide for which they are responsible by paying money to a company that works to reduce the total amount produced in the world, for example by planting trees” (Smoot, 2022, para. 4). Offset credits are ways of tracking said offsets and are measured in tons of carbon dioxide-equivalent (CO₂e) reduced. The first offset project occurred in 1989, with the planting of a forest to offset a coal-fired power plant (Smoot, 2022). This most popular, cost-efficient practice of tree-planting deals with carbon sequestration, or long-term storing of carbon in plants. However, when these projects are not maintained and managed, trees cannot fully mature to their intended ability to capture and store carbon.

Unfortunately, tree-planting has become a method of inexpensive yet unreliable way to obtain carbon credits. Some companies use this method of offsetting alongside carbon accounting to declare themselves “carbon neutral,” or having purchased the necessary number of offsets to account for their GHG emissions. This unreliable method of credit achievement is why many organizations are looking to renewable energy projects, such as solar and wind, for offset projects to earn reduction credits. Clean energy projects, such as solar, much more easily meet the five agreed-upon criteria to ensure environmental integrity, according to the World Resources Institute (Goodward & Kelly, 2010). They are 1) real, representing one ton of CO₂e emissions reduced; 2) permanent, or irreversible; 3) additional, meaning in response to incentives provided by a carbon offset market; 4) verifiable, by an independent qualified third party; and 5) enforceable, usually via a registry, to ensure proper ownership and avoid double counting.

Finally, in the past decade, the cost to install solar infrastructure has dropped over 70 percent (Chu & Tarazano, 2019). In a long-standing stagnant industry like energy in which one or two generational methods have dominated for decades upon decades, research into making renewable energy methods like solar cheaper and more efficient has shaken things up. So, as companies’ stakeholders worldwide grow increasingly concerned with global sustainability, they are expecting action and accountability of these industry entities which contribute to over 30% of GHG emissions from electricity generation (United States Environmental Protection Agency, 2021). Luckily for these stakeholders, social media and communications technology developments and advances have made it easier than ever to learn about alternatives to burning fossil fuels, like solar

energy, which do not harm the environment. Corporate leaders, in return, are looking for ways to prove concern for reducing GHG emissions through sustainably conscious actions.

Carbon offsetting is just one way that companies are looking to do their part in helping solve the climate crisis. Solar energy infrastructure is becoming one of the cheapest, most reliable and efficient ways to account for GHG emissions, and it's up to consumers of the companies that are contributing to the crisis the most to hold them accountable and work toward saving this planet. The difficult part for consumers, though, is sorting through the numerous methods to help solve the crisis. Companies like Clearloop, though, use education marketing on social media to help inform consumers' choices when it comes to sustainable practices.

Part 2: Social Media Marketing

Shifting gears, the advertising industry today looks very different from how it looked 20 years ago. Social media advertising and digital advertising didn't exist then, and today it's relied upon heavily by most companies, big and small. In 2001, internet advertising spending in North America totaled about \$6.6 billion; in 2021, it totaled around \$268 billion (Zenith, 2021). This growth represents a complete industry shift in 20 years as companies adapted to the consumer behavior of online absorption of content. The advertisement-filled online universe people consume now, though, started primarily as a way of networking and connecting with friends.

i. Social Networking

Social networking and instant communication online started out just like it sounds – social. It was all about connecting with friends one speaks with every day as well as friends one hadn't seen in years. Early-comers into the scene included Classmates.com, with a focus on essentially creating virtual class reunions, and SixDegrees.com, which in 1997 was the first site that allowed users to create profiles and make friends (Shah,

2016). While these sites and others like them weren't sticking with consumers, by the early years of the 21st century, online social networking began to grow in popularity, and websites dedicated to the idea grew more successful. Friendster, which followed a similar model to dating sites, and LinkedIn, which took a serious, business-focused approach, launched in 2002 and 2003, respectively, and saw success with their respective circles of consumers (Shah, 2016). The once dominant platform Myspace also joined the social networking space in 2003, becoming the most visited website on the planet by 2006 (Maryville University, 2021). The current tech giant Meta launched as Facebook in 2004, opening to the public in 2006, and it eclipsed the competition. According to Digital Trends (Shah, 2016), the source of Facebook's success is up for debate. Whether it's the memorable name, the ease-of-use, or the variety of features, there's no arguing that Facebook, with the arguable exception of LinkedIn (which serves a very different purpose and/or audience), has seen the most ideal combination of success and longevity since its launch 15 years ago.

The launch of YouTube in 2005 and the progress made since marked the first change-up in social networking. Facebook used a similar model to its predecessors, having combined the best features from many that came before it and executing it successfully. YouTube was the first "non-traditional," in a sense, social networking platform, in that it was the first one to place a focus on video content (McFadden, 2020). YouTube paved the way for video consumption on all platforms – those with video focuses, like TikTok, and those with video as a non-primary feature, like Facebook itself. Similarly, having launched in 2006, was Twitter. What YouTube did with video, Twitter

did with world news. They each took what made Facebook the premier social networking platform – the ability to connect and share with friends – and placed their own spin on it.

According to Christopher McFadden of Interesting Engineering (2020), 2008 marked a shift for business-use of social media for advertising purposes. In the innovation adoption curve, the percent of business placing a focus and attention on account creation and advertising on the most popular social networking platforms hit somewhere in the early majority, potentially late majority, portion of the curve. Two years later, Pinterest and Instagram launched and shook up the industry with, yet again, their own emphases on social networking. For Pinterest, it was do it yourself (DIY), content curation based heavily upon interests and hobbies of the user and his/her friends. Instagram, more significantly, placed a heavy focus exclusively on photo-sharing. Moreover, it was nearly entirely mobile-focused (Shah, 2016). These determining factors led to Instagram’s enormous success, which prompted Facebook to purchase the platform just two years after its launch in 2012 (McFadden, 2020).

Social networking means connection, but what happens when connections have already been made? Consumers begin to look for other benefits to social media.

ii. Social Entertainment

Social media for approximately the first 20 years (from around the launch of Friendster to now) consisted primarily of social networking, the growth and development

of which is detailed in the platforms described above. Social media practices for companies were twofold, in most cases – building profiles and pages to make a connection with consumers and creating deliberate advertisements. For businesses’ advertising, this largely meant inserting advertisements on feeds, eventually based upon the browsing history and data collected by platforms of their users. According to their literature review on SMM in 2015, researchers Khan and Jan note that from previous research, it was necessary for companies to employ relationship marketing, “to shift from ‘trying to sell’ to ‘making connections’ with the consumers” (p. 14). This realization is all about relationship-building, and that’s exactly what made advertising and marketing on social media for the first 20 years or so incredibly successful. Their review from 2015 continues:

Social Media is an innovative tool that organizations use for creating a very strong public relation with the customers on the virtual networks. Maintaining public relations through social media has become easy because a large number of potential consumers are available on the virtual networks. And making connection with consumers using social media is only some clicks away. Today’s customers are more powerful and busy; therefore, companies should be reachable and available in every social media communication channel. (p. 14)

It’s clear that marketing professionals during social media’s “infancy,” so to speak, understood that relationships and constant communication are at the heart of a successful presence on digital media. And that’s still true, and something that will always remain a key to winning online consumer connectivity achievement.

However, there's been a shift in consumer expectations that's growing social media and, therefore, SMM into something newer and much different. Members of Generation Z, to whom many companies are turning their attention as the newest base of consumers with a growing purchasing power, are the generation that follow Millennials and represent the second-youngest generation in society at the moment. With an average attention span of eight seconds, Gen Z is all about video, particularly short-form video (Brooke, 2022, para. 4). This is social entertainment – sure, they connect with friends and participate in social networks as their parents and even grandparents have. But they have been around social networking all their lives, and it's not something that's new or interesting anymore. What's interesting to Gen Z are individuals, creators, and companies that get creative on social media and capture their attention with entertaining content.

Journalist Jenni Baker (2022) from The Drum writes:

Now, [video] has become the primary method in which consumers – particularly Gen Z – express themselves, communicate with others, and make their purchasing decisions. At the heart of this shift is short-form video and social entertainment, which presents one of the most challenging, yet rewarding, turning points for marketers since the dawn of social media. (para. 2)

This change in behavior was accelerated, if not prompted, by the global pandemic due to COVID-19, which occurred from early 2020 until early 2022, as of the writing of this paper.

Gen Z was yearning for connection and distraction in a time filled with loneliness and isolation, and they found that in social entertainment. Instagram, for instance, which started as a very one-track platform with photo sharing, now has a video-filled

environment, including Reels, Stories, Instagram TV (IGTV), and ordinary feed videos. Snapchat has entertainment options listed directly below friends' stories as well as its own version of Instagram Reels called Spotlight. Facebook introduced stories and increased the importance it placed on video with Facebook Watch. Even YouTube, which already focused on its own practice of short-form video which tended to be around the 10-minute mark, entered the "shorter"-form video environment with YouTube Shorts (Bretous, 2021). Most all these platforms or platform subsets launched in late 2020 in response to one that changed the game of short-form video forever, that used social entertainment to launch with success in the market that no competitor has been able to achieve. That platform is TikTok.

iii. The Age of TikTok

TikTok launched in 2016 as a short-form video sharing platform, and it merged with app Musical.ly in 2018 (Maryville University, 2021). The app saw a significant increase in downloads at the start of 2018, but what put TikTok on the map with some of the other major platforms was its explosive growth at the beginning of 2020. Between Q4 2019 and Q1 2020, TikTok downloads surged 58%, increasing from 201M to 318M in a single quarter (Chan, 2021). Q2 2020 saw downloads sustain at 301M, before they normalized the next quarter at 188M (Chan, 2021). Still, this massive spike, due no doubt

in part to the global pandemic, signaled the power that TikTok was to have in the months and years to come with consumers.

Social entertainment hit its stride in 2020 and 2021, marking a turning point for expectations and behaviors by consumers. TikTok pioneered the power of trends, which echoed slightly to the other platforms but most of which started on TikTok. Most significantly, though, TikTok reflected its core user-base, and that's thanks to several things the platform did correctly.

Potentially most obviously, TikTok nails short-form video. At launch, videos were limited to 15 seconds, which lengthened to 60 seconds sometime later. In July 2021, the limit was increased to 3 minutes, and in February 2022, the platform began rolling out 10-minute maximum videos to some users (Vincent, 2022). While the success of this massive increase in runtime has yet to be seen, what can be said for the platform's traditionally limited video length is its appeal to consumers' short attention spans. Unlike a platform like YouTube, on which users must spend time between videos searching until one is found that they intend on watching, the formula on TikTok is much simpler. Watch the first few seconds of a video, and either 1) stay on the video for (most of) its entirety; or 2) scroll on to the next video. From an early point, it became known for highly curating content based largely upon the viewing habits of the user, or narrowcasting. Users want to find content they like without leaving the simplicity of the platform, so they keep on scrolling and scrolling (Arcane Lost Team, 2021). The simplicity of the viewing experience, then, is laid out. What makes this entertainment social, however, is the simplicity of the content creation experience.

Ease of creation and communication are what make a social media space social. TikTok thrives on the shared experience as well as the individual. During the pandemic, the platform provided users with a way to connect with one another across the world. It was a space unfamiliar to many, and those interested in content creation felt open to experimenting, even if it meant feeling silly. The traditional 1/9/90 rule of thumb for social media platforms – 1% creators, 9% engagers, 90% viewers (Kuchinskias, 2011, para. 2) – began to not fit TikTok’s model as time went on. Sam Duboff, Head of Creator Product and Brand Marketing at Spotify, wrote, “Thanks to an openness to create, meme & remix features, and platforms investing in ways to narrowcast, we’re seeing more creating and engaging with content. The lines between creator and consumer continue to blur” (Zebra IQ, 2020, p. 29). Gen Z, the age range with the largest share of the TikTok user-base (Backlinko, 2022), puts a lot of value in authenticity, freedom to create, direction without directions, and relatability, and that’s where TikTok succeeds the most.

Finally, for brands, this all means one thing, broadly – be adaptable to change. Brands that see return on investment (ROI) on TikTok are the ones who experiment, fail, learn, and try again. The tightrope that many are walking, and that I found to be true in my internship with Clearloop, is keeping messaging in-line with brand guidelines on the platform. Self-deprecation is not just appreciated on TikTok – it’s expected. Anything less than meme-ability, the embrace of irony and virality, authenticity and experimentation on the platform will come across as cringey and forced. Additionally, firms need to embrace what TikTok does best – promoting and engaging creators. The term “influencer,” as it has grown somewhat exponentially in public use since late 2016 (Google Public Data, 2022), has also accumulated a connotation of major content creators

appealing to a large audience. However, while these types of influencers do exist and have success on TikTok, micro influencers are a subset of creators who appeal to niche audiences with specific interests. Over time, as the For You Page (FYP) becomes more tailored to users' interests, certain creators with specific themes and messaging around such interests appear more often. Each creator has his/her own brand, so firms succeed when they find micro influencers who share values and genre of content with the brand of the company. The best strategy is to bet (wisely, after research) on these micro influencers through unconventional user-generated content (UGC), trusting them to appeal to the audience whom they know best (Zebra IQ, 2020, p. 48). These strategies combined allow brands to take full advantage of social media 2.0 – social entertainment.

Consumers and creators on TikTok – and those in Gen Z, specifically – are some of the most informed on the climate crisis. The challenges come, though, with getting them to care through effective green messaging.

Part 3: The Challenges of Green Marketing

Green or sustainable marketing is the idea of informing, educating, and selling consumers on investing wholeheartedly and financially in global environmental preservation efforts through various sustainable practices. It is a niche area of marketing and advertising that requires specific engagement methodology by the companies that wish to promote those ideas. From their 2021 journal article, Nozari et al. write:

Sustainable marketing involves the development and promotion of products and services that meet customers' needs in terms of quality, efficiency, price, and convenience without having a detrimental effect on the environment, society, or economy. It involves high technologies that communicate the offer and promote sustainable lifestyles and operations in companies. (p. 1)

The primary goals of sustainable marketing, upon which the success of any marketing campaign hinges, are to educate consumers, increase awareness for environmental issues, and call the consumer to some sort of action.

Educational marketing is what we referred to at Clearloop as “evergreen” – it doesn't pertain necessarily to a current issue or initiative, but rather provides a resource that can be used and visited over time by consumers to learn more about the things they care about or are interested in. It may not see short-term payoff, but rather most of the time builds a foundation for the second step, increasing awareness for the issues. A clear

line of logic, in the mind of the consumer, from causes to effects is necessary to foster care about an issue. So, sustainably-minded firms must educate their audiences on the basics before creating the mental bridge to the short- or long-term circumstance. For Clearloop, it's helpful to note that they started out with the idea of giving companies the ability to attach a carbon offset to the products they sell. Clearloop CEO Laura Zapata said:

Our initial thinking was that we could distill it down to the product level, [because] consumers don't think about the GHG emissions of Coca-Cola, the corporation - what is [their] carbon footprint? What does that mean? It was more, 'I understand that I'm interacting with this [Coke] can,' and so the jump between what the consumer has to learn and what they are experiencing is not that big. (L. Zapata, personal communication, January 21, 2022)

However, after pivoting business models to one of partnering with companies to offset various amounts of GHG emissions (depending on the firm), the green marketing strategies became less reliant on pushing consumers toward a product and more about letting stakeholders and customers of partner companies know about their dedication to sustainable practices through investment in solar infrastructure. All intended messages, though, depend upon starting with educational content.

Increasing awareness for environmental issues in the mind of the consumer is not an easy feat. Green marketing, when done properly, educates consumers on the issue then persuades them to care about it. "Social media have been used to stimulate consumers to learn sustainable lessons, from highlighting personal environmental impact to motivating group prosocial behavior" (Sun & Wang, 2016, p. 864). It's one thing to teach consumers

about the issues, but it's another task entirely for them to relate it to themselves and their own behaviors. "Perceived consumer effectiveness (PCE) is consumers' domain-specific belief that their efforts can play a role in solving problems" (Sun & Wang, 2016, p. 863). Their research concludes that high PCE by the consumer yields a high concern for the environment, the value-based investment green marketing intends to make in promoting sustainable behaviors. So, the second key task in green marketing practices includes building support upon the educational content published about a topic to connect with the reader's personal beliefs. Moreover, thanks to the global segmentation of audiences available to marketers on social media, it becomes easy to reach the right demo- and psychographics on a niche level – those with concerns for the environment's preservation and willing to engage in real action (Sun & Wang, 2016, p. 863).

So, the third point green marketing strives to bring home is the action step. Once educational content is established on a specific topic and a firm has done the necessary steps to try to get consumers to care and connect to their own lives, the goal is to change consumer habits, those of either purchasing or lifestyle. "Customers change their buying habits, trends in the consumer market occur, and they are a basis for changing companies' offers" (Nozari et al., 2021, p. 4). This process is closer to one of years than months, but at its most efficient becomes a repetitive process. Once they know the PCE they have, they are willing to spend more to engage in sustainable practices. Companies, in turn, gain a competitive advantage in the marketplace when customers know that a centralized message is one of green awareness. Side-effect benefits of green marketing other than appealing to the consumers include the potential to align with government voluntary

and/or involuntary GHG regulatory practices, favor with non-government sustainably focused groups, external and internal stakeholders, and employees.

Finally, it's important for marketers to note the execution strategies of green marketing and potential effectiveness gaps depending on demographics and psychographics. As mentioned previously, social media gives professionals the tools to segment the target audience based upon said factors to cater messaging to best connect with consumers. "If they want to achieve maximum advertising effectiveness and encourage consumers to go green, advertisers need to heed caution in developing mass-marketing campaigns blanketing all consumers and instead delve into the specific motives that consumers in different locations hold" (Minton et al., 2012, p. 83). Once the step from education to fostering awareness is successful, green marketing will be effective. When it's something they're invested in from the start, consumers will act. So, studying the unique factors of the specific audience is the most important piece of initial work. Green marketing is one of Clearloop's strongest marketing strategies, but another comes with the startup culture and voice it uses to speak to consumers.

Part 4: Startup Marketing

Startup companies have specific marketing strategies and techniques at their disposal, especially on social media, that can yield higher success in advertising endeavors than businesses that have been in the marketplace for longer. The most significant quality a startup has is the consumer perception of young companies. It can yield many benefits, one of which is the ability to build a brand reputation from the ground up. People can't have opinions about companies they haven't heard of before, so using this to the advantage of startup marketing through practices like fostering relationships in online and in-person communities can prove very useful (Mingione & Abratt, 2020, p. 982).

As a startup company, you can't do everything alone. There are some best practices when it comes to utilizing the power of external forces, including consumers, partners, and other firms. The five best ways to “leverage leverage,” that is, to make the best use of others' advantages, are as follows: 1) take advantage of product/service advocates; 2) empower early adopter consumers; 3) establish anchor customer(s), people who provide credibility; 4) work with other companies that can also benefit; and 5) build an advisory board of experienced professionals who have been down this road before (Swenson et al., 2014, p. 57).

Finding industry professionals that can speak toward the importance of the service or product being offered by a startup helps give the startup credibility right off the bat. One of the strengths of startups – no preconceived notions or negative opinions by consumers – is also a weakness on the trust front. Partnering with advocates that care about the importance of the startup and can convince consumers to care, too, fosters trust.

Early-adopters are a set of consumers that come to the service with a certain passion that later customers may lack thanks to an interest fueled by any number of factors (in the case of Clearloop, the early-adopters were the people who cared deeply about environmental sustainability and clean energy from the start in 2019). This is the group that's hard to disappoint. As startup marketers, it's often useful to experiment with messaging and advertising ideas with this group to see the reaction. In the infancy of a startup firm, the importance of marketing is often underrated. However, there is no time in a business when the ability to try a variety of ideas is as easy and acceptable.

“Understanding the salient reasons early-adopter customer[s] love the product or service provides powerful messages that can be used with potential customers” (Swenson et al., 2014, p. 59).

Somewhat combining the first two steps is the significance of anchor customers. These provide some of the credibility of industry professionals, as those who have determined that the company aligns with their values, and some of the enthusiasm of early-adopters. These customers don't have quite the amount of trust as early-adopters, so it's necessary to educate them on the company's practices and products/services sufficiently beforehand. Anchor customers today come into the picture with certain expectations, no matter the industry. So, as a startup company vying for the attention of

anchor customers, these expectations must be delivered upon. As it relates to social media, the heavy majority expect constant communication across all channels. Most expect to be able to communicate and ask questions directly to company spokespeople, and marketers can use it as a tool to collect feedback from anchor customers (Babych, 2021). Anchor customers, in combination with early-adopters, will provide companies with the necessary community and financial support to expand the consumer base to a wider audience.

The fourth step mentioned above, working with key strategic partner companies, is the one that relates most to Clearloop's current model. Partnering with businesses is, in fact, the linchpin of their strategy. Where this fits into marketing of a startup is knowing the startup's limits – that is, knowing where it may fall short concerning messaging with consumers. Here, Clearloop uses the existing credibility of other companies on its socials to tell the story, and the consumer of the partner firm learning about the work of Clearloop is an added benefit. As stakeholders of companies worldwide become more concerned with environmental preservation responsibilities, it becomes easier for Clearloop to leverage CSR among most larger and even some smaller firms in the marketplace.

Finally, it becomes necessary for the leaders and founders of a startup to surround themselves with professionals who have experienced the successes and failures of similar enterprises before. Not only do these people give advice based upon experience, but they also lend themselves to providing even more credibility for the startup. These industry professionals should be knowledgeable about and interested in the issue that the startup aims to solve, and they should also bring a similar passion for the company as product

advocates. "If you're starting a company, find company advisors as soon as possible. The opportunity to run our initial strategies by a seasoned veteran would have saved us time, frustration, and headaches in the early stages" (Swenson et al., 2014, p. 61). Luckily for Clearloop, Phil Bredesen, former Governor of Tennessee and the Executive Chairman of the Board & Founder, previously founded Silicon Ranch, a national solar energy company with similar goals as Clearloop in terms of solar infrastructure. So, for Clearloop, much of the avoided mistakes came from Governor Bredesen's expertise and experience. People like these on a startup's advisory board provide contacts, influence, and time to help the company succeed in its early stages (Swenson et al., 2014, p. 61). For marketers, it never hurts to advertise these influential members to consumers and other business leaders to, like much of the strategies listed in this section, build credibility. After all, that is the biggest hurdle a startup faces upon launch. Marketers can use strategies like these, particularly on social media at low cost, to make a good first impression with the target audience (Babych, 2021). For Clearloop, though, that target audience is one step removed because they are the consumers of partner companies.

Part 5: Business-to-Business-to-Consumer Marketing

Finally, one of the vital, most important questions marketers must ask themselves when creating messaging and campaigns to launch is: “Who is the target audience?” There are more specific answers, of course, based upon demographics and psychographics, but consider for a moment the broad audience of a firm. For many companies, the answer is consumers. Communication strategies for these would be considered business-to-consumer (B2C). For those who sell products or provide services to other companies, the audience is made up of those external businesses. Industry professionals would likely call their marketing communication strategy business-to-business (B2B). There are many ways and channels through which to direct marketing messaging, but for the purpose of studying Clearloop’s communication strategy, note a combination of the two mentioned above – business-to-business-to-consumer (B2B2C).

In their study, Iankova et al. (2019, p. 44) asked firms classifying themselves as B2B, B2C, and B2B2C to rank the importance of various forms of social media for marketing efforts, 1 meaning not important and 7 meaning extremely important. It’s significant to note that those classified as B2B2C organizations consistently ranked higher averages than the former two types in a few key forms. In social networks, such as Facebook, B2B2C had an average importance of 6.51, while B2B had 5.42. For social streams, which included Twitter, the difference is less, with B2B2C at 5.79 and B2B at

5.35. This is still important to note, though, and is supported by end-consumer use of social media.

The primary strategies employed by B2B2C marketing, particularly on social media, are very much of a blend of B2B and B2C ones. “The direct customer is an organization, but marketing activities are targeted at the end consumer and intermediary simultaneously” (Iankova et al., 2019, p. 3). At Clearloop, the business development team in charge of reaching out to potential partner companies was usually the first point of contact between Clearloop and the businesses. The other primary point was Clearloop’s LinkedIn page, with which many businesses interact more than social media-focused platforms like Instagram and Facebook. With B2B2C models, both the business and the partner company are co-branding the product or service to stakeholders and consumers. So, they rely heavily on something called e-word of mouth (eWOM) to get messaging across effectively about both firms. For instance, when a computer manufacturer like Dell uses an Intel processor, both companies benefit from advertising the other through SMM and, therefore, eWOM. Moreover, it’s been shown that B2B2C organizations rely much more heavily on social media than B2B ones (Iankova et al., 2019, p. 44), which is likely due to the number of consumers using social media platforms to learn about companies and the issues they address. Social media is primarily used by B2B2C firms to provide customer service, build customer relationships, and attract new customers (Iankova et al., 2019, pp. 21-22).

Finally, in their study on digital engagement strategies in SMM, Drummond et al. (2020, p. 1255) determined four main layers of digital engagement tactics that posts for B2B, B2C, and, in turn, mixed models such as B2B2C, fall under. They are: 1) connect,

such as feeler posts; 2) engage, which includes two-way conversation posts; 3) coordinate, or informative & knowledge sharing posts; and 4) collaborate, which consists of collaborative events, posts, and promotions. For Clearloop, the most salient as far as B2B2C SMM was the fourth, collaborate. For a business that partners with brands to invest in clean energy, collaborative posting and cross-posting projects was of the most importance to reach the consumers and stakeholders of partner companies.

The fundamental strategies of B2B2C marketing rely on communicating with the consumers of the partner business as well as stakeholders at the business itself. Marketers should research the core beliefs of partnered companies and potential partners to ensure that the messaging is focused on overlap between the two entities' values. This is when B2B2C communication is most successful, when it engages and builds relationships with both consumers and the partner company. At Clearloop, the overlap of values between partners and Clearloop is often obvious – a concern for preserving the environment and investing in clean energy.

CASE STUDY: CLEARLOOP

During the summer of 2021, I participated in a season-long internship with Clearloop, a startup company in Nashville, TN, who focused on partnering with companies to build solar structure to offset GHG emissions for said firms. I worked alongside CEO and Founder Laura Zapata throughout my social media marketing internship, who founded the company alongside Former Tennessee Governor Phil Bredesen and Bob Corney, the current COO. The story of Clearloop is quite a unique one, and as a company that has just turned three years old, the core mission has remained the same – partnering with companies to get financial investments to clean up the dirty energy grid. Zapata and Corney were approached with the idea by Governor Bredesen after working on his campaign for U.S. Senate. Quoting the Governor, Zapata recalled:

There's lots of companies that are going to be thinking about sustainability and climate action. If the government's not going to be stepping in to [tackle] it, then how about we figure out a way to get businesses to help us clean up the grid and help us hit that low-hanging fruit of our electricity grid. We have the technology to make electricity from the sun, we just need more of it, and these companies can help. (personal communication, January 21, 2022)

The founders of Clearloop agreed that there was a problem with GHG emissions, and that the electricity sector was a major contributor to the issue, but they knew that, like most citizens, no one knew exactly the best way to tackle it. Corney agreed that it's hard

for one person to understand the positive impact he/she can have on helping solve the climate crisis, given the many directions that firms worldwide are pulling for solutions:

The reality is that with focus, we can [make an impact]. Aside from taking responsibility for recycling, energy conservation, and more sustainable living, our engagement with the brands we love and use every day can be harnessed to have a multiplying effect. By reclaiming the carbon emissions of our purchases from the US electric grid, we can eliminate almost a third of all carbon emissions in the US economy. (Clearloop, 2021a)

This focus, initially, was on the individual product, as previously detailed in the literature review section. If companies could measure the amount of carbon emitted into the atmosphere through all the production and transportation processes associated with a single product, they thought, then consumers could relate that carbon footprint to something physical and tangible. However, it soon became clear to the founders that companies were not at that level yet, because they did not know how to measure the carbon footprints of any of their processes. This was the first of many environmental “dots” that Zapata and her co-founders had to begin connecting with companies as well as for themselves, and it didn’t come easily.

There was a bit of hesitation, though, in the idea of focusing on carbon offsetting.

“There's a lot of hand wringing around [carbon] offsets – is it really doing the right thing? [Is] reduc[ing] [in]directly just paying for your sins? But what we then focused on was renewable energy. People understood [that] solar projects [are] good” (Zapata, personal communication, January 21, 2022).

The idea was becoming clearer – Clearloop could become a marriage of the solar industry and the carbon offsetting field. Zapata recalled, though, that professionals in the two did not communicate or work together on environmental issues, and that their goals were not aligned. And uniting those two fields is something that Zapata and her team still work on to this day.

We are still trying to merge these two things, to say [that] companies are not just looking for green energy to get green energy on their books. It's because they want to reduce [their] carbon footprint. So, we start acknowledging the fact that new solar projects are helping avoid fossil fuels from generating a carbon footprint. (Zapata, personal communication, January 21, 2022)

During my time with the company, much of the marketing regarding educating the consumers of partner companies as well as the partner companies themselves about the work Clearloop was committed to doing revolved around three processes: measure, reclaim, and track. This was in reference to the amount of carbon emissions by each partner being reclaimed through the construction of solar infrastructure. Clearloop gave companies the freedom and tools to decide which of their business' carbon emissions they wanted to offset. After this decision was made and GHG emissions measured, it came down to a financial commitment to fund solar infrastructure to reclaim said emissions. Finally, what businesses and stakeholders value most is the ability to track and report the energy production of the solar investment.

During my internship, two teams worked simultaneously to get the word out about Clearloop's mission – the business development team and the marketing team. As a member of the latter, I worked primarily with TikTok and Instagram on social media, as

well as copywriting for captions of most of the posts across Clearloop's channels. No matter which one, though, the marketing strategy overall revolved around education and connection to Clearloop's purpose.

The first is that evergreen education piece, breaking down these concepts [and] making it really simple to understand, because we know that there's lots of people looking for information. And it's very hard to find all the information because it was hard for us to find it. And then the second piece of that is [that since] we're a business, we need to [both] educate in and connect the dots to how that greater context plays into what we're doing as a business. (Zapata, personal communication, January 21, 2022)

A large part of this strategy comes from the fact that Clearloop is a B2B2C business, meaning that most of the messaging going out goes to partners, which then goes to their customers and stakeholders.

At the end of the day, the reason that [a company] is interested is so that then we can share with their stakeholders what it is that the company has done. And that's a really important aspect, not just from a marketing perspective, but from a business development perspective. If we can continue to champion the people that are signing up with us, then we have returning customers, because they're validated in their action by a credible climate solution. (Zapata, personal communication, January 21, 2022)

This dual-audience marketing and development strategy is something I found challenging at first but caught onto and began to understand how to develop content that achieved both the education and advertising pieces Zapata mentioned.

As the primary creator for Clearloop's TikTok account, the platform was quite new to me, the learning curve of which was steep. The audience is much harder to understand than some of the more traditional platforms like Facebook and LinkedIn, and success of content can be tougher to predict. Something that Laura pointed out, though, set TikTok apart for Clearloop and gave me a head start in brainstorming content ideas for the platform.

What we found [on TikTok] was that there's already a conversation happening around sustainability on the platform, because the demographic tends to be younger. Gen Z doesn't need to be convinced that climate change is real. And I think that that's a different conversation starter. (Zapata, personal communication, January 21, 2022)

Especially as a startup with a climate change solution-oriented mission, experimentation on the platform was important to try to make connections. Because I never knew what would have the most success, it was all about trying different things, hopping on trends, and learning from what did well and what didn't. The most successful TikTok I created, for instance, was an adaptation of a video I'd made primarily for our other platforms and our newsletter around the "measure, reclaim, track" theme mentioned earlier (see Table 1).

During my internship, I made and posted 24 TikTok videos, with an average views/video of 330.2. As can be seen from Table 1, the "measure, reclaim, track" video received the most views with 1,257. As a post that was not intended for TikTok and one that I posted on the platform as somewhat of an afterthought, what that taught me was to

always cross-post videos, because with TikTok you truly never know what's going to find success.

Table 1

Clearloop TikTok Videos by Richard Springer - Analysis

TikTok Videos I Created While at Clearloop	Views	Likes	Comments	Shares	Type	My Voice/Image	Person Pictured in Video
Measure, Reclaim, Track with Laura	1257	16	0	1	Evergreen	FALSE	TRUE
Clearloop x Aether Diamonds	1056	16	5	4	Partnerships	TRUE	TRUE
Jackson, TN Community Leaders	648	9	0	0	Partnerships	FALSE	TRUE
"Emissionality" Explanation	639	7	0	0	Evergreen	FALSE	FALSE
Jackson, TN Groundbreaking Invite	467	5	0	1	Evergreen	FALSE	TRUE
Intern Series 3	264	4	0	0	Employee Intros	FALSE	TRUE
Laura explains Double Counting	255	15	0	1	Evergreen	FALSE	TRUE
National Scavenger Hunt Day	236	12	3	1	Fun/Comical	TRUE	FALSE
5 Reasons to Reclaim Carbon Footprint	225	22	0	1	Evergreen	FALSE	FALSE
Time Capsule Photoshoot	225	16	2	2	Fun/Comical	FALSE	FALSE
"Whosamour" Partnership	215	25	0	0	Partnerships	FALSE	TRUE
"Organized Adventurer" Partnership	213	9	0	0	Partnerships	FALSE	TRUE
Intern Series 1	206	12	2	0	Employee Intros	TRUE	TRUE
Clearloop x Vista Equity Partners	201	5	0	0	Partnerships	FALSE	FALSE
National Donut Day	197	11	1	2	Fun/Comical	FALSE	TRUE
Intern Series 2	193	9	0	0	Employee Intros	FALSE	TRUE
Look Back at Earth Day & Time Capsule Push	191	14	0	0	Evergreen	TRUE	TRUE
World Environment Day	190	7	0	0	Evergreen	TRUE	FALSE
#615 Day	185	7	0	0	Partnerships	FALSE	TRUE
Clearloop x Jason Isbell	180	4	0	0	Partnerships	TRUE	TRUE
First Day of Summer/Adult Swim Trend	176	16	0	0	Fun/Comical	FALSE	FALSE
Intern Series 4	173	3	0	0	Employee Intros	FALSE	TRUE
Intern Series 5	167	3	0	0	Employee Intros	FALSE	TRUE
National Sunglasses Day	166	3	0	1	Fun/Comical	TRUE	TRUE
Total	7925	250	13	14			

Table 2

TikTok Video Analysis by Type

Type of TikTok	Number of TikToks	Sum of Views	Average of Views
Evergreen	7	3224	460.57
Partnerships	7	2698	385.43
Employee Intros	5	1003	200.60
Fun/Comical	5	1000	200.00
Grand Total	24	7925	330.21

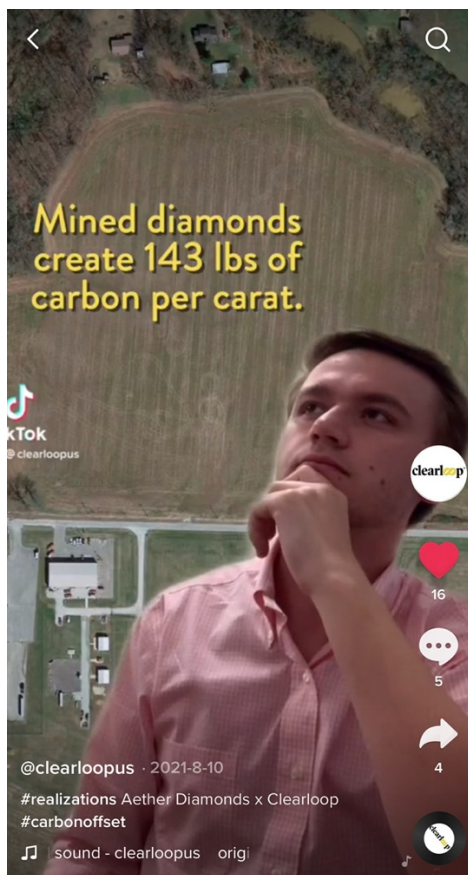
Note. This table represents the number, sum of views, and average views of all TikTok videos I created during my internship by the type of video.

From Table 2, it's clear that evergreen content outperformed any type of other videos posted, both in sum and average of views. This consisted of things like Laura breaking down Clearloop's mission, explaining what double counting carbon offsets

means, and any other concepts that we felt necessary to explain to our audience. The next best performing videos were those dealing with partnerships, either those with other companies or those with the Jackson, TN, community, where Clearloop broke ground on its first solar field. Finally, employee introductions and fun, comical videos performed about equally as well.

Figure 1

Screenshot from “Clearloop x Aether Diamonds” TikTok Video



Note. This is a screenshot of the video I created to announce Clearloop’s partnership with Aether Diamonds, a company that uses carbon captured from the air to create diamonds.

I want to analyze one TikTok video in particular that I created during my internship, which is pictured in Figure 1. It was the second-to-last video I made during

my internship, and it's the culmination of much of what I learned about the platform. I learned that there are a few things that make a TikTok video successful on the platform. First and foremost, a video has the best chance of being successful if it capitalizes on a trend. Trends on TikTok come in many shapes and forms. It's quite difficult to start a trend, but it's much easier for individuals or companies to join in on existing ones. Our thinking with this video was to use the "#realizations" trend to highlight really impactful facts about the partner company, Aether Diamonds, such as "Mined diamonds create 143 lbs of carbon per carat" and "Aether Diamonds removes 44,000+ lbs of carbon from the air per carat." This trend works well thanks to the audio.

The second most impactful part of a TikTok video's success is the audio. It often goes together with the trend, such as in this case. This audio is from the intro to Kool & The Gang's song "Summer Madness," and it became popular on TikTok with the "#realizations" trend. The idea was that with each chord getting higher in pitch, the person in the video has a bigger and bigger realization about something important. Which leads to my third point of success – having someone in the video.

Table 3

A Comparison of Average Views of TikTok Videos Either Featuring a Person or Not

Person Pictured in Video	Average of Views
Yes	354.88
No	270.29

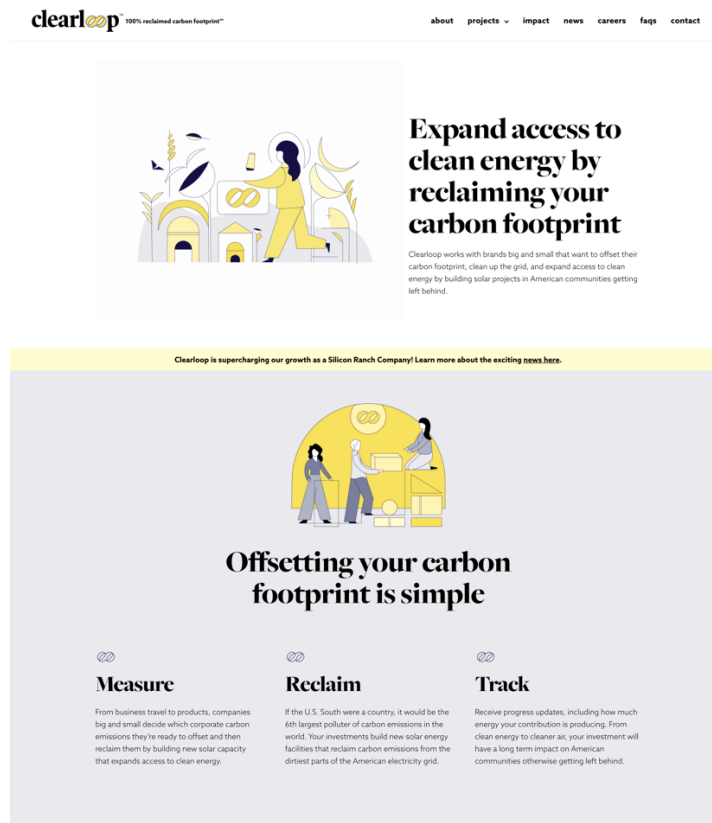
Something I discovered throughout my internship is that TikTok viewers want to see someone's image depicted in a video, or else they may swipe past it. According to Table 3, videos that featured people in them outperformed those that did not by an average of 84.59 views. While this may not seem significant, it made a big difference in

Clearloop's small but growing TikTok account and would matter a lot when scaled up to bigger accounts. These three points – capitalizing on a trend, using a viral audio, and having a person featured in the video – is what helped the Aether Diamonds partnership to be the second-best performing video I created. And as an aside, I was quite nervous to be on the front side of the camera in something this creative, but I can now say that I'm glad I decided to put myself out there in this TikTok, as it allowed me to learn more about how to be successful on the platform.

The most salient point about Clearloop's brand, to me, is explained perfectly by Figure 2. The simple, young, and less technical brand voice the company speaks with contrasts many of the other solar energy and carbon offsetting companies that exist in the field. Many that you may find have industrial sounding names, grey and dark blue themed logos and websites filled with technical jargon. Clearloop, conversely, keeps it easy for any reader to understand – it's all about clean energy making a positive impact on the energy grid, as outlined in Figure 2 from the homepage of their website.

Figure 2

Clearloop.us Homepage



Note. The language of the page is easy for anyone to understand, not just those familiar with Clearloop’s business model or clean energy & carbon offsetting.

“We needed to make it really understandable for consumers and everyday people to know what we were doing, actually, is true. And it's something that that brings value to what we do with Clearloop” (Zapata, personal communication, January 21, 2022).

On social media, this brand focus gave Clearloop the ability to experiment in the spaces of sustainability and renewable energy. A challenge, though, came with potential apathy from consumers due to the sheer enormity of the problem Clearloop has set out to solve. The best way to combat this tended to be making it an educational conversation.

Blogs written and shared on social media are about a variety of topics – from

greenwashing, to avoiding double counting, to the science behind solar energy generation. It is much easier to bite off one issue at a time rather than tackling the whole thing, which can lead to that paralysis of action.

Though most of my internship was remote due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I and most of my fellow interns were able to travel to Clearloop's office in Nashville, TN, for a weekend during the summer. It was a very informative weekend during which I was able to travel to a functioning solar panel setup and learn how PV solar energy is generated. The most impactful part for me, though, was our brand voice meeting on June 24th. Zapata and Corney started the discussion at the most basic level, and one research question in particular directed my thought process – What is the brand voice of a successful carbon offset/solar energy company in the U.S. South? First, that voice is different, innovative, and unique in the marketplace. Second, it's all about putting the spotlight on partner companies. I remember a quote from Corney (personal communication, June 24, 2021) regarding our marketing strategy. He said, "A pat on the back is about 12 inches from a kick in the ass." While it did make me chuckle, it was a useful reminder about the B2B2C nature of Clearloop's communication style – while yes, we can pat ourselves on the back for the work we're doing, we must remember that it is our partners that are making investments, and it's Clearloop's job to get the word out to those partners' consumers.

Third, and probably most important, is that when companies partner with Clearloop to offset some or all their GHG emissions through funding solar infrastructure, what they're buying most of all is the message. At Clearloop, we wanted them to be able to go to their stakeholders and customers and, more than likely, tell the story of their

commitment to sustainable practices with Clearloop as one part of the story and one tool of the solution.

Clearloop's positive, upbeat spin on the space of carbon offsetting and solar energy changed things up across the field. With a focus on the south and mid-south of the U.S., Zapata had a passion for bringing infrastructure to a part of the country with access to plenty of sunshine but without much in terms of resources to do so. The focus became on communities, particularly ones where the construction of clean energy would provide significant economic development. The draw for companies was twofold – a monetary investment in solar infrastructure, and a social investment. For instance, Clearloop's first solar project occurred in Jackson, TN. The Distressed Communities Index (DCI), provided by the Economic Innovation Group, rates communities based upon zip code to determine economic well-being, from prosperous, to mid-tier, to distressed. The DCI ranks Jackson, TN, as distressed. So, community leaders, with the help of Clearloop, looked toward the economic and health benefits of welcoming a clean energy project to the community. Moreover, the project in Jackson was built next to the Tennessee College of Applied Technology – Jackson. “[It] will be a key component in the creation of a local workforce development program for electricians and other trades in the area that will be prepared to join the clean energy economy” (Clearloop, 2021a).

It's community partnerships like the “model home,” so to speak, of the Jackson solar field that fundamentally sets Clearloop apart from other businesses investing in renewable energy projects.

Finally, the capstone of my internship at Clearloop consisted of me travelling to Jackson, TN, on September 2, 2021, to film the groundbreaking celebration of

Clearloop's first solar project. I brought my own camera equipment and documented the entire day. I filmed the setup of the event, the arrival and mingling of guests, the speakers, and the actual breaking of ground. I also filmed a Q&A that Zapata and Corney held at the nearby TCAT Jackson, where community leaders had the opportunity to learn more about Clearloop and the impact the new project would have on the community.

Figure 3

Screenshot from the video "Clearloop Breaks Ground in Jackson, TN"



As most of my internship was remote, I was excited to be able to capture the most original footage of any of the projects I got to work on at Clearloop through this video. I was quite proud of my final product from a long and tiring day in the middle of a grassy field in Jackson, and it represented an internship that I thoroughly enjoyed with a company I grew to care a lot about. Clearloop and this project specifically – seeing people from across the South come to a groundbreaking for a solar field that would give this distressed community unprecedented access to renewable energy and job opportunities – taught me the impact that one company can have when its values drive all communications that it produces.

As Clearloop hits its 3-year mark, it was were recently acquired in October 2021 by another solar energy company that Governor Bredesen founded, Silicon Ranch.

Zapata recalls:

The CEO of Silicon Ranch tells the story that he's had several meetings, over the course of a year or so, where [customers] that he was talking to wanted to learn more about Clearloop. There was no real association between Clearloop and Silicon Ranch, it was just that we had a Co-Founder in common, and they were our development partner in the construction phase of the [Jackson] project. But other than that, we were very, very separate companies. And so, he said, 'After the six or seven times that you hear your customer asking about Clearloop, you want to make sure that you're also part of Clearloop.' (personal communication, January 21, 2022)

What this acquisition tells Zapata and Corney is that Clearloop had been successfully punching above its weight, so to speak, in terms of the impact being made on solar energy and carbon offsetting. Not only that, but also that Clearloop had brand advocates out there that they didn't even know about. Reagan Farr (Clearloop, 2021b), Silicon Ranch Co-Founder and CEO, says that the partnership allows the company to utilize Clearloop's strengths to benefit companies looking to make an impact in different ways on the energy grid:

Today, carbon is becoming an increasingly influential driver in corporate power purchasing decisions, creating an opportunity to decarbonize the grid at a faster pace and scale if we can expand opportunities for more companies to take action. Now, this partnership with Clearloop enables us to help our corporate customers

offset their carbon footprint with yet another science-based, innovative solution.
(Clearloop, 2021b)

During my time with Clearloop, I learned how a brand successfully speaks with its brand voice on social media to impart the biggest, most genuine impact it can make on its consumers and partners. There are three key theses I conclude yield the highest rate of success for companies focused on green marketing in the 21st century: 1) take risks when it comes to setting yourself apart from competitors in terms of brand development and social media strategies; 2) don't make assumptions about what consumers of your content know about your company or its industry; and 3) with every single campaign, post, and piece of content put out by your firm, ensure that you have first confirmed that it aligns with the brand values and speaks with the brand voice of the company.

Especially when first starting out, I cannot stress enough the necessity of taking risks on social media marketing efforts by consuming media in the field you're entering. When I got assigned Clearloop's TikTok account, I did my due diligence of learning best practices for the platform at the time and getting a feel for the solar energy landscape of content. But besides that, it was all about going with ideas I had about connecting with consumers that weren't things being done by other companies. Since Gen Z is the most active generation on TikTok and very active on most other social media platforms, there are a few things they appreciate and expect. They want to be entertained with content that's sometimes self-deprecating to the company itself, they want to know that professionals have a sense of humor and can laugh at themselves, and they enjoy seeing different takes on trends that occur on social media. In the clean energy world, this often

means adapting trends to fit themes of sustainability, something which Gen Z also happens to care very strongly about (Tyson et al., 2021).

Second, educational content in this field is very important. As Zapata noted, there are so many ways that governments and entities in the private sector are tackling the detrimental effects of climate change. With Clearloop, the focus was on solar energy and reducing companies' carbon footprints. However, no matter the specific strategy, the sustainably focused industries can often be hard for the everyday consumer to wrap his/her head around. So, never make assumptions about what he/she already knows, and don't be afraid to talk about things that your company has already explained. Clearloop has blogs on the history of solar energy, climate justice, misconceptions about solar power, and more. This evergreen content breaks down complicated goals that a company has into hundreds of potential topics to discuss, and blogs are just one way to go about it. Livestreams, podcasts, and TikTok videos are just some of the great ways to help explain the circumstances around which your company operates, and even if it seems oversimplified or somewhat indirectly related to the mission of the company, if it aligns with the brand voice, it is useful content for consumers to digest.

Finally, establishing that unified brand voice early in the life of the company is the most important tool a marketer should use in every single piece of media he/she creates. At Clearloop, we always aligned ourselves and our content with values including positivity, honesty, simplicity, and compassion. Things we steered clear of included bringing in politics and any sort of negativity related to climate change. And while it may seem elementary to have this as the most important lesson I learned from working at Clearloop, it brings home what successful marketers and communicators in the fields of

advertising and SMM constantly hope to achieve – occupying a specific set of attributes and beliefs in the mind of consumers regarding companies and what they stand for (Patel, 2021, para. 4). At Clearloop, we wanted those attributes to be sustainable mindedness; real, genuine care for the environment; care for communities across the South getting left behind in the era of clean energy; and taking environmental preservation matters into our own hands as members of the private sector. Brand voice always, always comes first. It should be evaluated and reevaluated, adapting when necessary to changes in the industry, but remaining constant on fundamental beliefs the company will never waver on. This is what drives all social media messaging of a successful, green-focused company in 2021.

CONCLUSION

I can confidently say that Clearloop saw, is seeing, and will continue to see success in its industry because it distinguished itself significantly from the competition by establishing a solar energy company for the average person and community. The state of energy generation in the U.S. and most of the world is like a massive ship headed in a singular direction – now that it has all this momentum in dirty energy, it's quite difficult to redirect toward renewable sources. Advances being made in the development, cost, and efficiency of building and financing solar energy, however, has made the ship a bit easier to steer in the right direction. Moreover, a combination of government and private sector expectations is putting the pressure on stakeholders and company professionals to address the GHG emissions they are creating in every step of production.

With the state of social media and online communications, it is now easier than ever, and getting easier every day, for the average consumer to get information about nearly any topic. Holding companies accountable for their contributions to the climate crisis, then, has become more accessible to consumers. Therefore, corporations and firms big and small are or will be looking to resources and methods to decrease or offset their carbon footprints as more and more emissions expectations, either voluntary or involuntary, are put in place. Clearloop, then, has positioned itself uniquely as a B2B2C startup that's helping said companies clean up the dirty energy grid by measuring the GHG emissions of the desired amount of carbon to be offset, constructing solar energy

infrastructure to account for them, and tracking the amount of clean energy put into the grid to share with applicable stakeholders. They're doing so in the U.S. South, and their focus moving forward with project development is on economically distressed communities with little-to-no production of renewable energy. Laura Zapata and Bob Corney, now in partnership with Silicon Ranch, strive to select communities where these solar projects can make the biggest impact, through clean energy jobs and economic investment.

Marketing these efforts to consumers of partner companies of Clearloop on social media is what I was tasked with contributing toward during the summer of 2021, and what I took away more than anything was the power of brand distinguishment and brand voice. Clearloop, across its channels, continues to set itself apart as a brand whose mission anyone can understand and most agree is worthwhile and important to the survival of our planet's most precious resources. Clearloop uses its beginnings as a startup company with bold, ambitious goals, its position in the U.S. South, and its spotlighting-the-partners marketing model to continually succeed with outreach and partnerships across its platforms.

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