

The Impact of Ethical Branding and Communication at Fruit of the Loom

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Introduction

Ethical branding has become increasingly important in the apparel industry because consumers, employees, investors, and regulators want companies to demonstrate responsibility beyond producing affordable goods. Clothing companies are expected to consider the environmental effects of raw materials, energy consumption, water use, packaging, worker safety, wages, and conditions throughout global supply chains. A company's reputation therefore depends not only on what it sells but also on how its products are manufactured and how honestly it communicates its practices.

Fruit of the Loom is a recognizable apparel brand associated with underwear, T-shirts, socks, activewear, and other everyday clothing. It belongs to Fruit of the Loom, Inc., a Berkshire Hathaway subsidiary that owns several apparel and sporting-goods brands. The company describes its original purpose as making reliable clothing affordable, positioning accessibility and value as important parts of its identity. It has also developed a sustainability framework called Fruitful Futures, organized around three pillars: People-Centric, Planet-Conscious, and Product Authenticity.

These commitments align with my personal values of environmental stewardship, fair treatment, inclusion, and organizational integrity. However, ethical alignment should not be based only on a company's promises. A responsible evaluation must examine measurable results, independent oversight, transparent reporting, and the willingness to disclose areas requiring improvement.

This essay argues that Fruit of the Loom's ethical branding can strengthen its reputation, employee culture, and relationships with customers when communication is transparent, measurable, and supported by responsible business practices. The company uses sustainability reporting, supplier standards, certification, digital campaigns, partnerships, and stakeholder engagement to communicate its identity. Nevertheless, overreliance on one-way corporate communication could create skepticism if employees, workers, and customers are not given meaningful opportunities to provide feedback. Fruit of the Loom should therefore continue moving from simple information distribution toward two-way stakeholder involvement.

Company Background and Personal Values

Fruit of the Loom is not primarily an outdoor-clothing company. It is a longstanding apparel brand that produces basic clothing for men, women, and children. The broader Fruit of the Loom, Inc.

organization designs, manufactures, and markets apparel, intimate clothing, athletic products, and sporting equipment through brands that include Fruit of the Loom, Russell Athletic, Spalding, and Vanity Fair.

The company aligns most closely with my value of environmental stewardship because it has publicly established goals relating to energy, greenhouse-gas emissions, water, waste, packaging, and raw materials. Its Fruitful Futures framework describes sustainability as “both a business imperative” and a responsibility connected to the company’s long-term development. The framework was developed around the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and through consultations involving employees, suppliers, customers, and consumers.

Environmental stewardship means using natural resources responsibly and considering the effects that current decisions may have on future generations. This value is especially relevant to apparel manufacturing because the industry depends heavily on cotton, synthetic fibers, chemicals, water, energy, transportation, and packaging. A company that wishes to present itself as environmentally responsible must therefore address the effects of its entire value chain rather than focusing only on recycling within corporate offices.

Fruit of the Loom’s 2024 sustainability summary reported that 92 percent of its cotton was obtained through identified sustainable-cotton programs. It also reported that renewable sources accounted for 73 percent of its indirect electricity and that water-use intensity had fallen by 23 percent from the company’s base year. In addition, the company reported that its U.S. retail plastic packaging contained at least 60 percent recycled material and that its U.S. e-commerce plastic packaging contained 100 percent recycled material. These figures provide more meaningful evidence than a general statement that the company “cares about the environment.”

My values also include concern for human dignity and fair treatment. Fruit of the Loom states that its People-Centric pillar addresses respectful workplaces, human and labor rights, workforce representation, community investment, health, safety, training, and fair compensation. The company reported that all its owned operations were covered by worker health and safety committees in 2024 and that all employees in those operations received training on occupational health and safety policies.

Ethical alignment, however, should not be interpreted as proof that every factory or supplier always meets the desired standard. Global supply chains are complicated, and even companies with codes, audits, and certifications may identify violations. A more credible sign of responsibility is whether the organization searches for problems, reports them, develops corrective actions, and ends relationships when suppliers consistently refuse to improve.

Fruit of the Loom reported conducting 181 supplier social assessments in 2024. Four major issues were identified, the company reported that all were addressed through corrective action plans, and one factory was removed for failing to demonstrate the expected level of improvement. These disclosures show that ethical supply-chain management involves identifying and correcting problems

rather than claiming that problems never occur.

The company is also associated with the Fair Labor Association, a multistakeholder organization that evaluates labor-rights systems and conducts independent assessments. Fruit of the Loom has been listed in FLA materials as an accredited company, which introduces a degree of external accountability beyond the company's own reporting. Nevertheless, accreditation should be viewed as evidence of an established compliance system, not as a guarantee that every workplace is free from violations.

The Meaning and Importance of Ethical Branding

Ethical branding occurs when an organization incorporates social, environmental, and moral commitments into its brand identity and supports those commitments through actual policies and conduct. It differs from ordinary promotion because it asks stakeholders to judge not only whether a product performs well but also whether the company behind it behaves responsibly.

An ethical brand must demonstrate consistency among its values, operations, and communication. A clothing company cannot credibly advertise respect for workers while ignoring forced labor, unsafe factories, harassment, or unlawful working hours. Similarly, an organization cannot claim environmental leadership while refusing to disclose its emissions, water consumption, waste, or material sources.

Du et al. (2010) explain that corporate social responsibility can strengthen stakeholder relationships, loyalty, reputation, and advocacy. However, these benefits depend on communication. Stakeholders must know what the organization is doing, understand why it is doing it, and believe that its motives and evidence are credible. Weak awareness or suspicion concerning corporate motives can prevent a company from receiving reputational benefits even when it has invested in responsible programs.

This issue is particularly significant in the apparel sector. Consumers cannot normally observe the agricultural source of cotton, the energy used by a textile mill, the conditions inside a sewing facility, or the treatment of workers in a supplier's factory. They therefore depend on information from corporate reports, product certifications, regulators, journalists, labor organizations, and independent monitoring bodies.

Ethical branding can reduce this information gap by making evidence accessible. Fruit of the Loom's reporting of supplier assessments, renewable electricity, cotton sourcing, water consumption, packaging, and product certification gives stakeholders information they can examine over time. The company reported that 100 percent of its Tier 1 suppliers were identified publicly and that all products manufactured in its own operations had achieved OEKO-TEX certification by 2024.

However, ethical branding becomes unethical when communication exaggerates small achievements, hides harmful practices, or uses vague environmental language that cannot be verified. This practice

is commonly associated with greenwashing. To avoid it, companies should clearly distinguish between completed achievements, current progress, future goals, and areas where performance remains inadequate.

For example, Fruit of the Loom's 2024 summary reported that 92 percent of its cotton met its sustainable-sourcing definition, but recycled polyester represented only 2 percent and recycled nylon remained at zero percent. Reporting both strong and weak areas creates a more credible picture than highlighting cotton progress while omitting limited results in synthetic materials.

The Importance of Communication to Organizational Culture

Organizational culture consists of the values, assumptions, expectations, and behaviors that influence how members of a company work. Formal value statements can contribute to culture, but employees learn what an organization truly values by observing leadership decisions, rewards, communication patterns, and responses to problems.

Communication is essential because values cannot shape behavior unless employees understand them. Workers need clear information about expected conduct, safety procedures, environmental goals, reporting channels, production standards, and the reasons behind organizational decisions. Communication also enables employees to identify inconsistencies between official policy and everyday practice.

Borkowski and Meese (2021) emphasize that communication influences collaboration, leadership, conflict management, decision-making, and organizational effectiveness. Although their discussion is situated partly within healthcare management, the underlying principles apply to global apparel companies. Employees cannot contribute effectively when information is delayed, contradictory, incomplete, or inaccessible.

Welch and Jackson (2007) argue that internal communication should not treat all employees as one uniform audience. Different groups have different responsibilities and information needs. Factory employees, designers, sustainability specialists, retail teams, logistics personnel, senior leaders, and contracted suppliers require messages adapted to their roles, languages, education, locations, and working conditions.

This principle is particularly important for Fruit of the Loom because its operations and supply chain extend across numerous countries. The company reports working with more than 350 suppliers and translating its Code of Conduct, benchmarks, and supplier guidelines into 34 languages. Translation improves access, but effective communication also requires workers to understand the standards and feel safe reporting violations.

A strong communication culture should therefore include both information and employee voice. Management must explain policies, but employees must also be able to ask questions, challenge unsafe practices, report misconduct, and recommend improvements without retaliation.

Men and Stacks (2014) found that authentic leadership helps create transparent and symmetrical communication, which strengthens relationships between employees and their organizations. Their research indicates that leadership communication is closely connected to employee trust, commitment, and perceptions of organizational integrity.

At Fruit of the Loom, communication about ethical conduct is supported by its Standards of Business Ethics. The standards address regulatory compliance, anti-corruption, conflicts of interest, confidentiality, data protection, fraud, financial reporting, political activity, and third-party due diligence. The company also reports using employee training, annual certifications for selected roles, site audits, and reporting mechanisms to promote compliance.

These measures can support a positive culture only when leaders apply them consistently. Employees will distrust ethical messages if high-performing managers are permitted to violate standards, safety concerns are ignored, or workers who report problems face negative consequences. Culture is therefore strengthened when communication is followed by fair action.

Effective Communication Methods Used by Fruit of the Loom

One effective communication method is the publication of the Fruitful Futures sustainability reports and annual summaries. These publications organize the company's goals and results around people, the planet, and product authenticity. They include year-by-year figures, allowing readers to compare progress rather than relying on isolated promotional statements.

The company also uses a formal governance structure to communicate sustainability internally. Its sustainability program includes senior-leadership oversight, a governance committee, annual scorecards, and a cross-functional working group that meets regularly to review greenhouse-gas performance and operational challenges. This structure can help ensure that sustainability information moves between senior leadership, manufacturing, sourcing, logistics, engineering, environmental health and safety, and other departments.

A second effective method is the use of supplier codes, guidelines, assessments, training, and performance scorecards. Ethical manufacturing cannot be achieved through consumer advertising alone. Suppliers must receive clear expectations regarding labor rights, safety, environmental performance, quality, cost, and delivery. Fruit of the Loom states that social compliance is considered alongside commercial measures when supplier performance is evaluated.

A third method is collaboration with external stakeholders. The company identifies relationships with organizations and initiatives including the Fair Labor Association, Cotton USA, Cotton LEADS, OEKO-TEX, the American Apparel and Footwear Association, WRAP, and regional nonprofit organizations. Such partnerships can provide expertise, shared standards, external scrutiny, and opportunities for industry-wide action.

Fruit of the Loom also communicates with consumers through its website, advertising, email, customer-service channels, social media, product information, and retailer partnerships. Its digital back-to-school campaign, developed with GSD&M, The Trade Desk, and Walmart Connect, used consumer research and predictive audience segments to reach both established and new customers. According to the company's account, the campaign exceeded its key performance goals.

This campaign illustrates how external communication can combine familiar brand language with data-driven advertising. It also demonstrates the importance of selecting channels that match consumer behavior. Customers who do not regularly shop in physical stores may be reached through retail-media networks, online video, social platforms, and e-commerce environments.

However, effective ethical communication should not be evaluated only through advertising results. An advertisement can increase attention or sales without improving understanding of labor or environmental performance. Fruit of the Loom should therefore maintain a distinction between product promotion and sustainability disclosure. Commercial campaigns can remain humorous and accessible, while ethical claims should be specific, evidence-based, and linked to measurable results.

From One-Way Information to Stakeholder Involvement

Morsing and Schultz (2006) identify three broad approaches to corporate social-responsibility communication: stakeholder information, stakeholder response, and stakeholder involvement. The information strategy is mainly one-way because the company distributes information to audiences. The response strategy collects stakeholder reactions but still allows management to control the agenda. The involvement strategy creates ongoing dialogue in which the organization and its stakeholders influence one another.

Fruit of the Loom's sustainability reports represent the stakeholder-information approach. They provide useful data, explain goals, and communicate progress. Consumer research and feedback surveys represent the response approach because the company collects information about stakeholder preferences.

The company can strengthen its ethical culture by expanding the involvement approach. Employees, supplier-factory workers, labor organizations, local communities, customers, and environmental specialists should have opportunities to influence priorities rather than merely react to plans

developed by management.

Meaningful involvement could include worker advisory committees, independently managed grievance channels, multilingual employee forums, supplier workshops, community consultations, consumer panels, and public responses to stakeholder recommendations. The company states that employees, suppliers, customers, and consumers contributed to the development of Fruitful Futures, which provides a foundation for broader participation.

Communication Strengths, Risks, and Improvements

Stakeholder	Current or appropriate method	Main strength	Possible weakness	Recommended improvement
Employees	Training, meetings, ethics standards, performance reviews, digital platforms	Clarifies expectations and supports coordination	Messages may become overly top-down	Add regular anonymous surveys, listening sessions, and visible responses to employee concerns
Factory workers	Codes, translated guidelines, training, grievance procedures, audits	Communicates labor and safety standards	Workers may fear retaliation or lack direct access to brand leadership	Use independent multilingual grievance systems and report aggregated complaint outcomes
Suppliers	Assessments, scorecards, corrective action plans, workshops	Connects ethical expectations with sourcing decisions	Audit-focused communication may encourage short-term compliance	Provide long-term capability building and reward verified improvement

Stakeholder	Current or appropriate method	Main strength	Possible weakness	Recommended improvement
Consumers	Advertising, social media, packaging, product pages, sustainability reports	Makes the brand accessible and familiar	Ethical information may be overshadowed by promotional content	Publish concise product-level sourcing and environmental information
Regulators and NGOs	Reports, certifications, disclosures, partnerships	Supports accountability and shared learning	Heavy reliance on corporate self-reporting can create skepticism	Increase independent assurance and publish unresolved challenges
Communities	Donations, volunteering, partnerships	Demonstrates local involvement	One-time donations may have limited long-term impact	Develop multiyear programs with community-designed objectives

Possible Ineffective Communication Methods

One ineffective method is excessive dependence on digital communication without sufficient personal interaction. Emails, dashboards, videos, and online training can distribute information efficiently, but they do not guarantee understanding. Factory workers may have limited digital access, different levels of literacy, or questions that standardized messages cannot answer.

Fruit of the Loom could address this problem by combining digital resources with supervisor briefings, small-group discussions, visual materials, translated documents, and opportunities for employees to ask questions. Important safety and ethics messages should be repeated through multiple channels rather than delivered only once.

Another ineffective method is one-way communication. Management may publish a policy or sustainability report without asking how employees and stakeholders interpret it. This approach can create the appearance of transparency while preventing meaningful participation.

The solution is to create feedback loops. After communicating a new policy, the company should collect questions, measure understanding, identify barriers, and report what it changed in response. Employees are more likely to trust a feedback process when they can see evidence that their input

influenced a decision.

A third weakness is the use of vague ethical language. Phrases such as “eco-friendly,” “responsibly made,” or “good for the planet” can be misleading when they lack definitions and measurable evidence. The company should identify the material, certification, baseline, reporting period, methodology, and limitations behind each claim.

For example, stating that 92 percent of cotton met specified sustainable-sourcing standards provides more information than simply describing the cotton as responsible. Likewise, reporting both the percentage of renewable electricity and the remaining dependence on nonrenewable energy gives stakeholders a more complete understanding.

Poorly managed meetings represent another ineffective method. Meetings without objectives, agendas, relevant participants, or follow-up actions can consume time without improving communication. Fruit of the Loom could require meeting organizers to identify the intended decision, distribute information in advance, assign responsibilities, and record deadlines.

Communication silos may also occur when sustainability, marketing, human resources, sourcing, manufacturing, and legal departments work separately. A marketing team might make a claim that the sustainability team cannot verify, or a sourcing decision might undermine a public labor commitment.

Cross-functional review is essential for preventing these contradictions. Environmental and labor claims should be examined by sustainability, legal, sourcing, operations, and communication specialists before publication. The company’s existing cross-functional sustainability working group provides a useful structure that could be extended to ethical-brand communication.

Finally, communication becomes ineffective when a company publicizes success but remains silent about setbacks. Stakeholders recognize that no large global company is perfect. An organization may gain more credibility by acknowledging incomplete goals, explaining why progress slowed, and describing corrective measures.

Recommendations for Stronger Ethical Branding

Fruit of the Loom should continue publishing annual performance data but provide more explanation of changes between reporting periods. For example, changes in emissions, employment, supplier numbers, and material sourcing may result from operational improvements, acquisitions, closures, production changes, or revised calculation methods. Readers need this context to evaluate progress accurately.

The company should also seek independent assurance for important environmental and social metrics. Certifications and FLA participation already provide some external scrutiny, but independent

verification of selected sustainability figures could further reduce concerns about self-reporting.

Employee and worker voices should become more visible in public communication. Sustainability reports frequently emphasize management plans and numerical outcomes. Including anonymized worker feedback, grievance trends, remediation examples, and lessons from unsuccessful initiatives would provide a fuller account of organizational culture.

Fruit of the Loom should also create simplified product-level communication. Many consumers will not read a detailed corporate report. QR codes, product pages, packaging labels, and concise online summaries could explain material sources, certifications, packaging content, and care practices in language that is accurate and understandable.

Finally, communication effectiveness should be measured through more than sales, impressions, or clicks. The company should examine whether employees understand its ethical standards, whether workers trust grievance channels, whether suppliers improve after training, whether customers understand sustainability claims, and whether stakeholders view the information as credible.

Overall Evaluation

Fruit of the Loom demonstrates several characteristics associated with ethical branding. It has created a formal sustainability framework, published performance data, established supplier standards, reported environmental and social measures, and participated in external labor and sustainability organizations. These practices align with my values of environmental stewardship, human dignity, transparency, and responsible business.

The company's strongest communication method is its combination of public reporting and operational measurement. Numerical disclosures concerning cotton, electricity, water, packaging, supplier assessments, product certification, and safety make its ethical claims more concrete.

Its principal communication risk is the possibility of relying too heavily on information created and controlled by the company. Ethical branding becomes more credible when independent organizations, workers, suppliers, communities, and customers can question claims and influence decisions.

Fruit of the Loom should therefore be evaluated as a company making measurable ethical and sustainability efforts rather than as an organization that has resolved every environmental and labor concern. This balanced evaluation avoids both uncritical praise and the assumption that every corporate responsibility program is merely promotional.

Conclusion

Ethical branding can create important benefits for Fruit of the Loom by strengthening trust, clarifying

corporate purpose, attracting values-oriented employees, improving stakeholder relationships, and differentiating the company in a competitive apparel market. These benefits arise only when the brand's communication reflects its actual conduct.

Fruit of the Loom's Fruitful Futures framework connects its ethical identity to people, environmental performance, and product authenticity. Its sustainability reporting, supplier codes, assessments, certifications, partnerships, advertising, and digital communication provide several channels through which it can explain its values.

Communication is equally important inside the organization. Employees and suppliers require clear expectations, accessible training, safe reporting systems, and evidence that leaders apply standards consistently. A positive culture cannot be created through slogans alone. It develops when workers experience fairness, transparency, participation, and accountability in daily decisions.

The company should continue strengthening two-way communication, independent verification, worker voice, product-level transparency, and disclosure of incomplete goals. These measures would help prevent greenwashing and demonstrate that ethical branding is based on continuing improvement rather than selective promotion.

Overall, Fruit of the Loom aligns with my personal values because it has made environmental stewardship, labor rights, product safety, and community responsibility visible parts of its corporate strategy. That alignment remains conditional on the company's willingness to measure results honestly, correct failures, and involve stakeholders in shaping future decisions. Ethical branding is most powerful when an organization does not merely describe itself as responsible but provides credible evidence that responsibility influences how it operates.

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