

# SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY MESSAGES THAT RESONATE

## Research Insights for Brands & Marketers



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# The Challenge

After a wave of corporate engagement in social justice in the U.S., some companies are retreating from their public commitments. At the same time, research demonstrates that consumers want to see their values reflected in their purchases<sup>1</sup>. Caught between regulatory shifts and consumer demand, companies are struggling to find balance.

Brands must better understand the social issues that resonate across consumer cohorts and speak to their audiences authentically. The research by NYU Stern CSB, with support from Edelman and Ford Foundation, aims to:

address how brands can use social messages to activate, not alienate, their core consumers

inform which social messages, if any, resonate across cohorts

1. [2025 Edelman Trust Barometer Special Report: Brand Trust, From We to Me](#)

# The Opportunity

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The NYU Stern Center for Sustainable Business (CSB), with support from Edelman and Ford Foundation, have partnered with seven consumer brands across industries to conduct a comprehensive, empirical analysis of social sustainability message performance to deliver findings on resonant claims and best practices in consumer communications.

We have identified which social sustainability messages are most appealing for consumers, helping brands confidently invest in positive societal impact and integrate action-backed social issue messaging into their communication. This initiative builds on our ground-breaking research into the environmental sustainability messages that best resonate with consumers, found [here](#).

The goal of this research is to equip brands with the most effective communications strategies to deliver social impact as a driver of brand appeal.

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# Methodology

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A custom online study for seven iconic brands was conducted among a sample of the U.S. general population in the end 2024/early 2025. Respondents for each brand were asked to evaluate 30-35 different messages (including a mix of category and social sustainability messages) to gauge their overall appeal.

Rather than using a traditional rating scale, we utilized a user-friendly and robust analytical approach called MaxDiff. It is designed to force a top and bottom pick from a short list of messages in each choice set, making the respondent task easier, and providing better discrimination in responses across the messages. Each respondent evaluated multiple choice sets, allowing for messages to be randomized based on an experimental design.

The MaxDiff results yielded an appeal score for each messages—in aggregate and among key sub-groups of interest. The MaxDiff scores for each brand were then loaded into a TURF simulator to identify the optimal combination of messages to maximize overall appeal.

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# Messaging Framework

*The social sustainability messages tested were within the following themes.*

## Ethical Business Practices

Internally focused business practices providing ethical working conditions and benefits for employees and supply chains

## Inclusivity

Internal and external practices that support and serve specific demographic cohorts, supporting inclusivity

## Societal Wellbeing

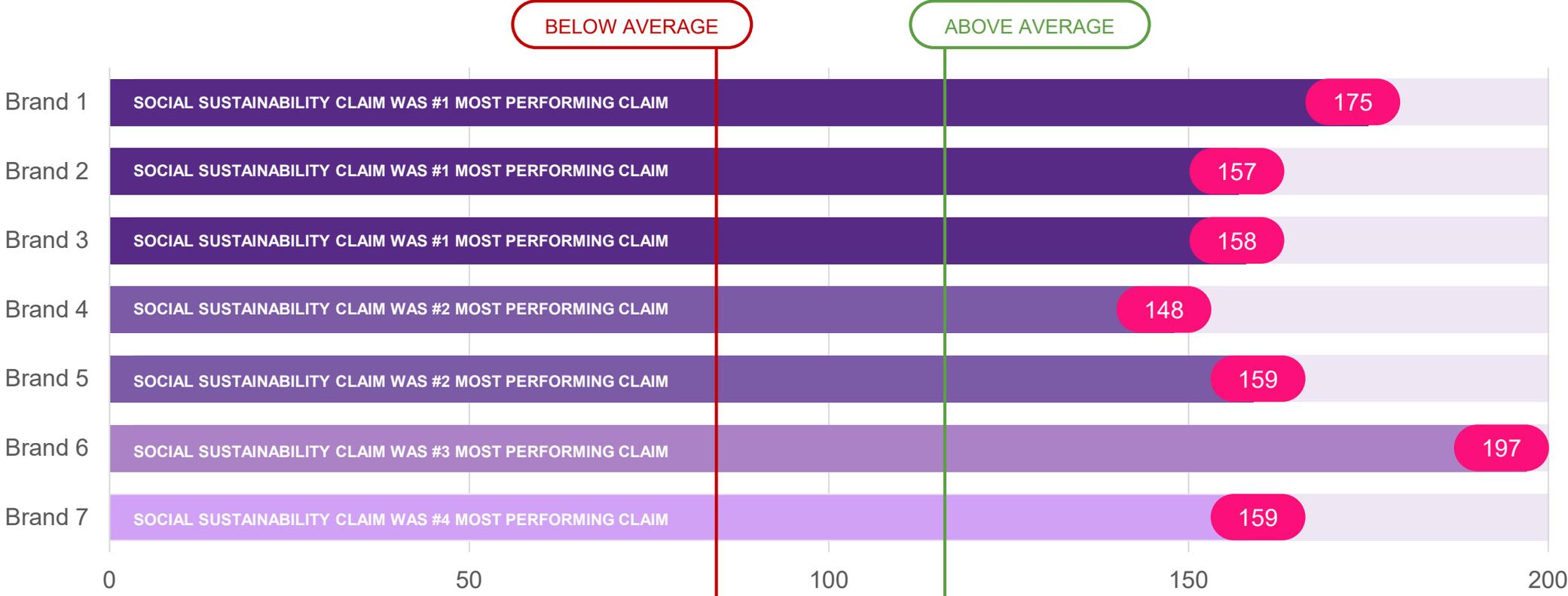
Externally focused business activities designed to address societal issues and inequities

# ■ Research Findings

# ■ Lessons Learned

# Lessons Learned: social sustainability messages can outperform category messages

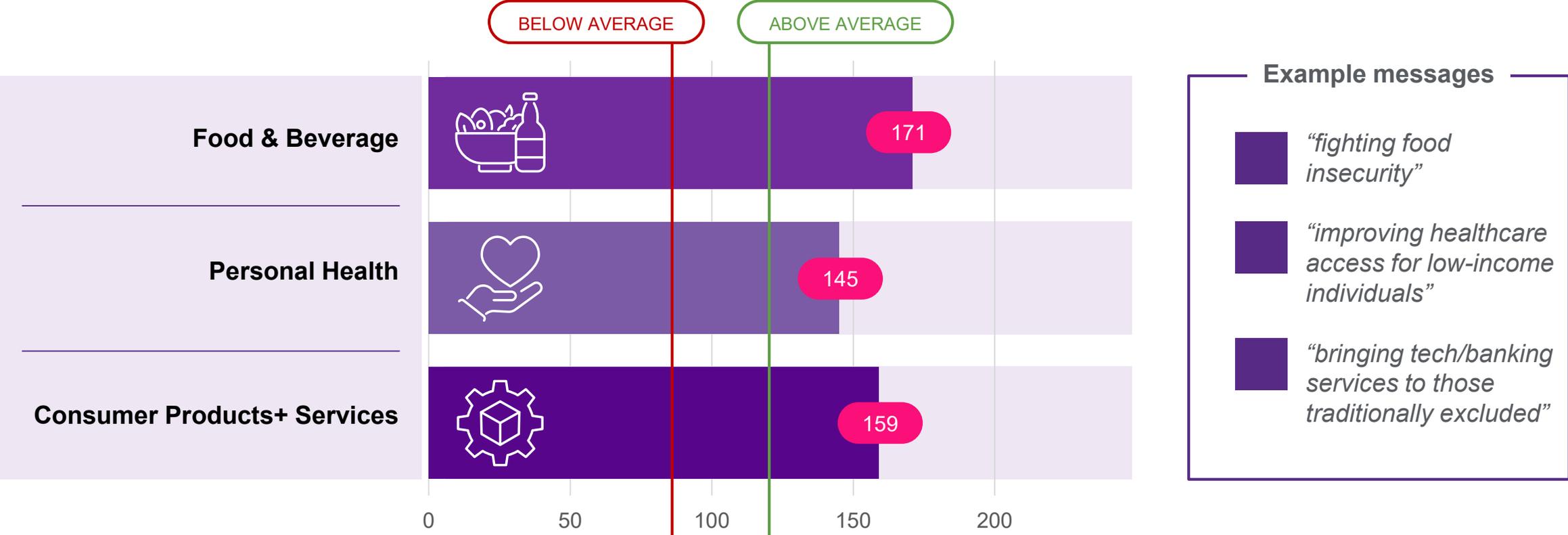
Social sustainability messages were amongst the top performing messages.  
The social sustainability claim for 3 of 7 brands was the single best performing claim.



Note: Brand A at 175 should be read as 75% more appealing than the average claim.

# Lessons Learned: Category-aligned social messages drive higher appeal

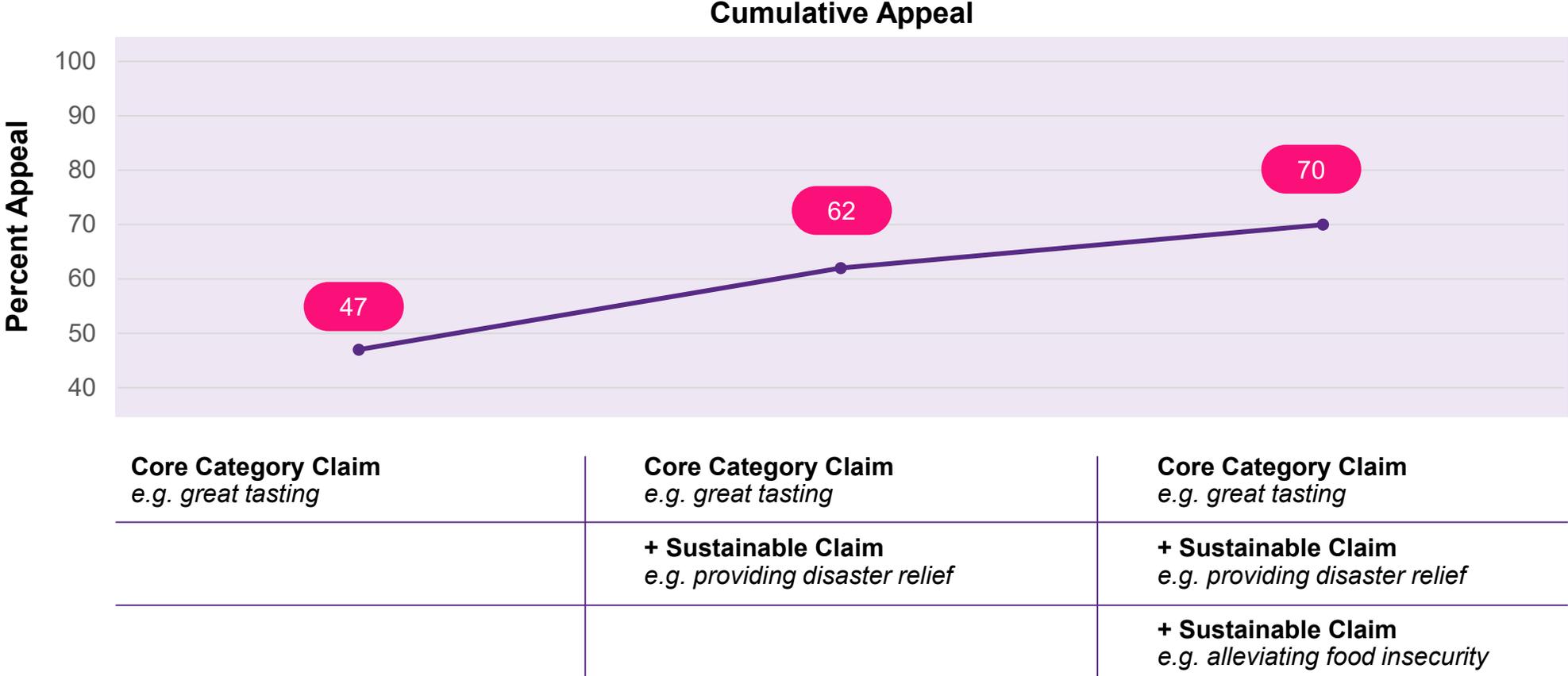
Messages that directly connect social impact to the brand’s core offering—such as food access for food brands —consistently scored above average in consumer appeal.



Note: messages are illustrative. Numbers reflect the average of category-related social messages.

# Lessons Learned: Layering social messages boosts brand appeal

Adding one or two social impact messages to a core product message increased appeal by 23 percentage points, demonstrating the cumulative power of social messaging.



Note: messages are illustrative. Numbers reflect the average appeal for each claim combination.



# ■ Best Resonating messages

# Best resonating social sustainability messages: ABCs

*Social sustainability messages that performed strongly across brands and cohorts fit broadly into the following themes:*

<b>A</b>	Access
<b>B</b>	Basic needs
<b>C</b>	Crisis response
<b>D</b>	Disability and veteran community
<b>E</b>	Economic status

# A

# Access

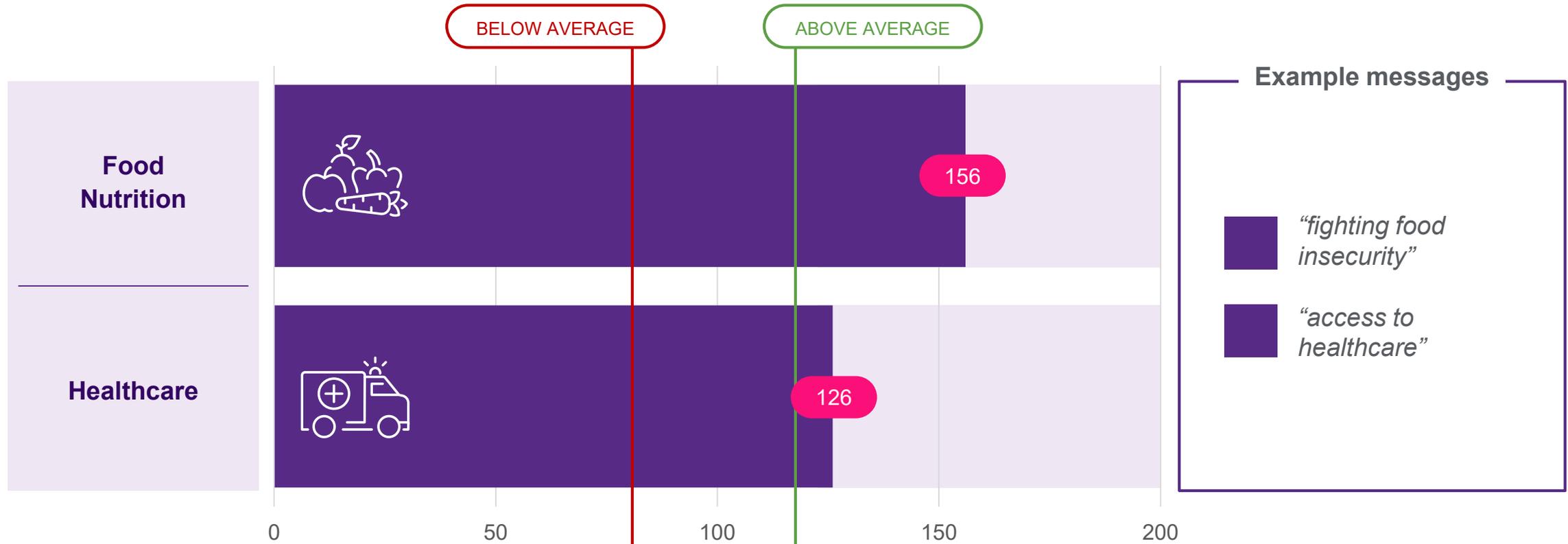
Promoting equal access to products and services, removing gaps in opportunity.



# B

## Basic needs

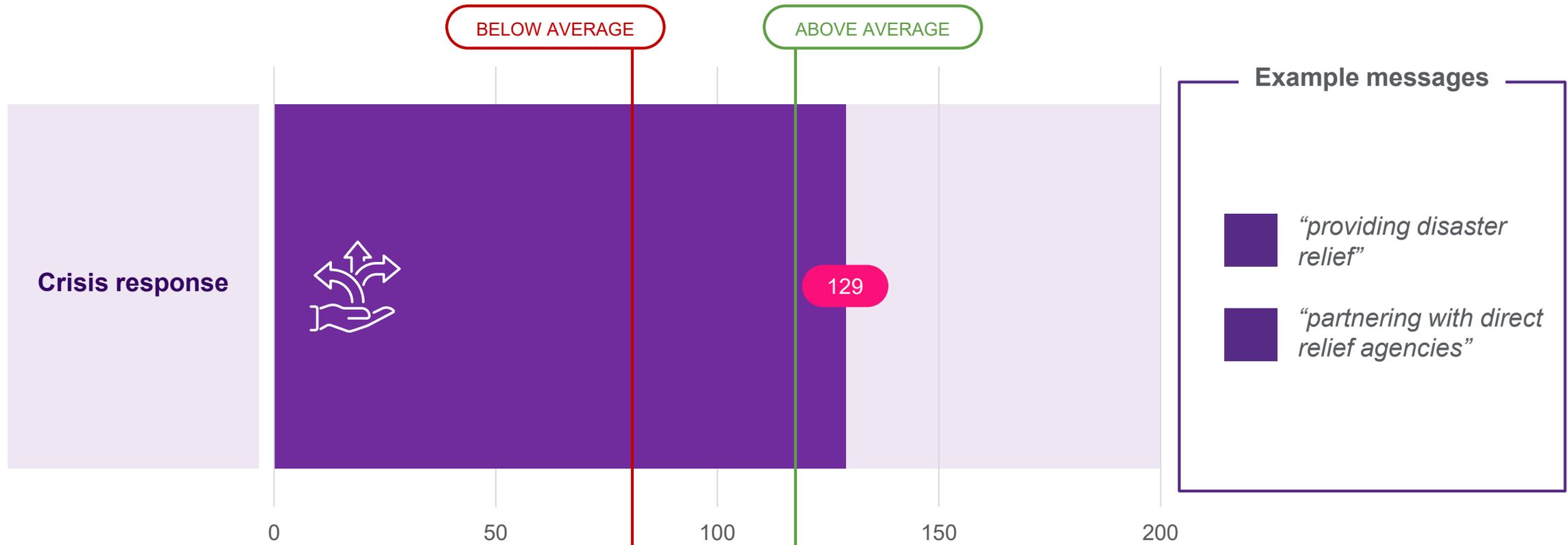
Providing communities with needs and services essential to human life.



# C

## Crisis response

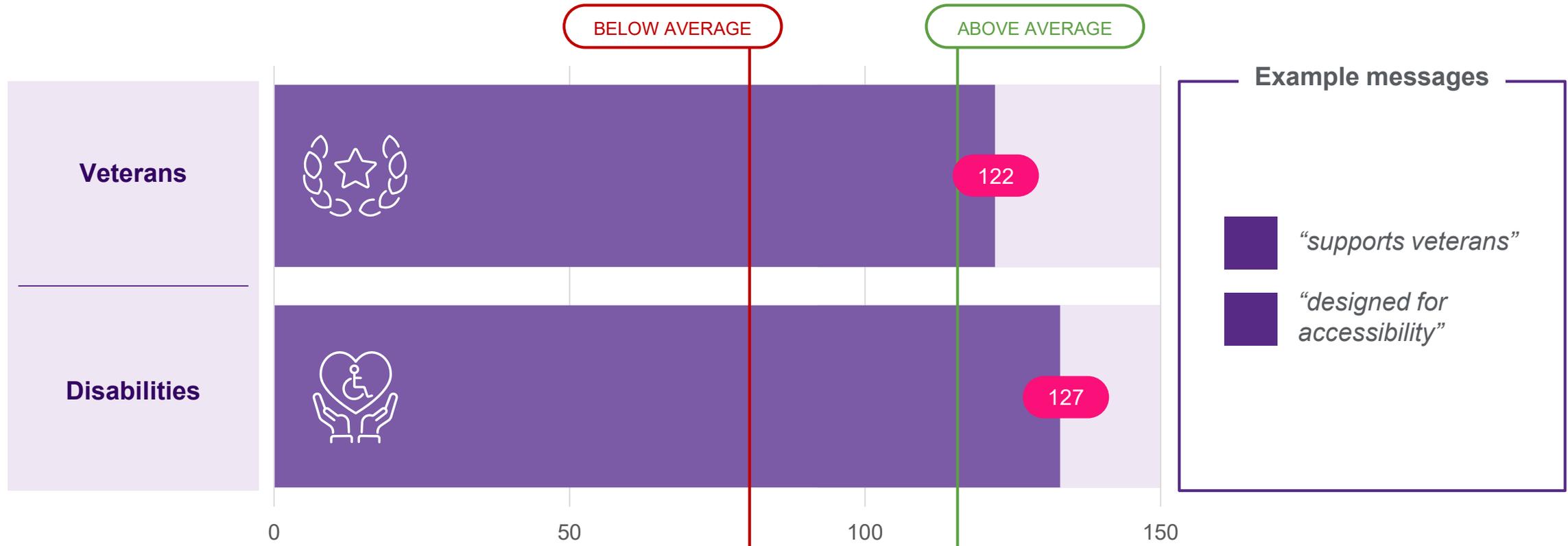
Using resources to support disaster relief, emergency response, and community uplift.



# D

## Disability and veteran communities

Programs and products designed to support people with disabilities or veterans and their families.



# E

## Economic status

Relating to socioeconomic status such as “underserved,” “underrepresented,” “traditionally excluded” and outperformed other forms of identity.



# ■ Demographic Trends

# Demographic

*The strongest performing social sustainability messages overall performed well across demographic and psychographic cohorts, including:*



Generation



Gender



Political Affiliation



Family Size



HH Income



Education



Urbanicity

# Demographic

*While these issues resonate across all audiences, certain groups respond especially strongly — highlighting an opportunity for deeper engagement with those cohorts.*



Younger cohorts responded more favorably to parental leave and familial messages



People of color responded more favorably to messages explicitly focused on racial equity, distinct from general community wellbeing and benefits for all



Women responded more favorably to messages supporting gender equity

# ■ Best Practices

# Best Practices

While communications should be anchored in the brand's core purpose, consumers also expect brands to take meaningful action on societal issues.

Create social messages that ladder up to your brand's role and mission. Identify and focus on social issues relevant to your business offerings, stakeholders, and sphere of influence. Specific, measurable actions outperform vague intentions.

Prioritize messages that address disparities in access to products, services, or opportunities.

Frame inclusivity around access rather than identity. To broaden appeal, use language about serving those that have been underserved, excluded, or otherwise marginalized.

Speak to your audience. While some messages resonate universally, others work best when targeted. Demographic-specific messaging is effective when it reflects a brand's authentic voice, a clear disparity/access problem, and demonstrated engagement in the community.

# ■ Appendix

# ■ Moderately Resonating Messages

# Moderate Performing Claim

*Messages that promote positive worker conditions and benefits had modest brand appeal*



**Fair wages/ fair trade**



**No human trafficking**



**Employee healthcare**