

# Case Study: WEtell

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*Nelly Rahimy*

*Purpose:* Regenerative and Distributive Mobile Communications

*Design Trait:* Purpose

## Key Facts

*WEtell* is Germany's first sustainable mobile communications provider, committed not only to minimising CO<sub>2</sub> emissions but also to generating its own green energy through photovoltaic systems. The company upholds the values of ecological sustainability, social fairness and data protection.

**Seat:** Freiburg

**Established:** 2019

**Founders:** Nico Tucher, Alma Spribille, Andreas Schmucker, Benjamin Thaidigsman

**Ownership:** Verantwortungseigentum (Steward Ownership)

**Legal Form:** Limited Liability Company

**Employees:** 26

**Webpage:** <https://www.WEtell.de/>

## Purpose, Business Model & Objectives

Purpose: "Regenerative and Distributive  
Mobile Communications"

In 2018, Alma Spribille, Nico Tucher, Andreas Schmucker and Benjamin Thaidigsman decided they could no longer wait for the sustainability transition to occur without them. With sustainable infrastructure emerging in various sectors such as energy, smartphones, food, clothing, and transport, they sought a yet-untouched area where they could make a significant impact. They identified a glaring gap in

sustainable mobile communications, with likes, phone calls, and photos contributing as much CO<sub>2</sub> emissions as domestic air travel.

#### Did you know that...

The mobile communications industry causes as much CO<sub>2</sub> emissions as Germany's domestic air travel? (WEtell 2025)

By 2019, *WEtell* was officially founded, with the aim of revolutionising mobile communications in Germany. By launching its company with a crowdfunding campaign, *WEtell* quickly sold 1,200 vouchers for mobile phone tariffs. Within three months, *WEtell* had installed 1,000 solar panels, producing more than enough energy for its 17,000 customers.

### Insights into the Purpose of Regenerative and Distributive Mobile Telecommunication

*WEtell's* DNA is firmly anchored in sustainability. The company's goal extends beyond reducing its environmental footprint—it aims to reshape the mobile communications landscape. This includes not only CO<sub>2</sub> emission reduction and compensation but also defending customer privacy and promoting transparency and fairness in the market.

In essence, *WEtell's* mission boils down to sustainability:

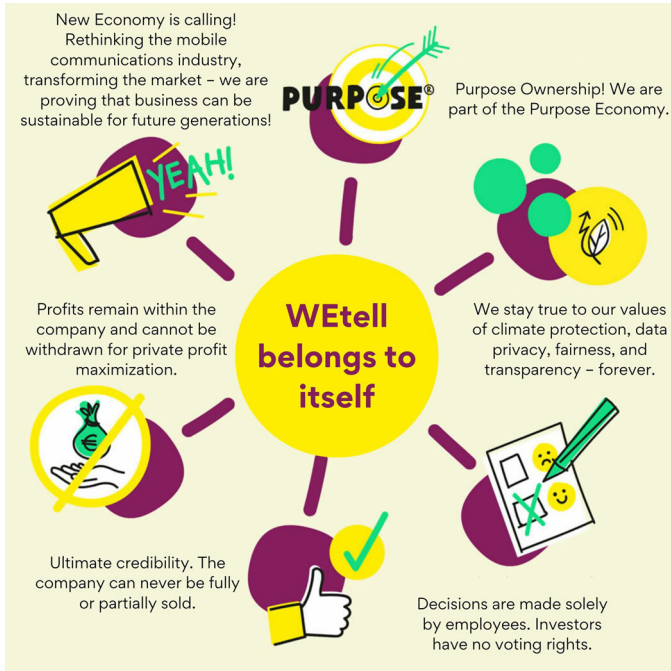
“We don't do sustainability to sell mobile services. We offer mobile services to promote sustainability.” – Nico Tucher, Co-Founder

The founders' work reflects a regenerative philosophy that acknowledges the responsibility businesses have towards the ecosystems they operate within, both environmentally and socially. Nico Tucher describes his personal motivation in the following way:

“If you're truly serious about purpose, it's not just about sustainability. At its core, I believe it's about something deeper—like love and connection to this planet. That's what people feel when they go out into nature — a sense of connection, like they're part of the bigger picture. If I can feel and sense that, then I won't destroy this planet. Instead, I'll do everything in my power to keep it functional, whatever kind of organism it is.”

Specifically, the firm has identified four areas that define its purpose: climate action and the interrelated areas of fairness, transparency and data protection.

Figure 1: WEtell Purpose and Steward-Ownership



Source: Modified design based on WEtell 2025.

## Climate Action

WEtell's philosophy asserts that simply reducing its environmental footprint is not enough: it must be regenerative, positively contributing to the rebuilding of natural ecosystems. This commitment is reflected in three key approaches: (1) avoiding carbon emissions wherever possible, (2) offsetting all emissions generated by the operation of the mobile network infrastructure—despite it not being owned by WEtell—through biochar projects, and (3) investing in the expansion of renewable energy sources. WEtell supports the transition to clean energy by producing its own electricity through self-built photovoltaic systems, generating more energy than its operations require and feeding the surplus back into the national grid.

“We install so much photovoltaics that more electricity is fed into the German grid than all these mobile communications with all the masts and so on need for anyone.” – Nico Tucher

## Fairness, Data Protection and Transparency

*WEtell* acknowledges that it is part of a larger system, and social fairness is integral to its sustainability mission. The company is committed to data privacy and ensures that customers' data remains secure.

For example, after careful deliberation, *WEtell* realised it might face a competitive disadvantage by not using common data tracking methods such as Google Analytics or Facebook Pixel. The company decided to test these data analysis tools for studying customer behaviour. To maintain transparency, it announced this trial through multiple channels, including its blog and newsletter. As Mareike Kühnel, Marketing Manager, recalls, after the trial period *WEtell* realised that “the value gained didn't justify any potential risks to data privacy, so we reversed the decision”.

Fairness also extends to addressing “green luxury”, the idea that sustainable products are often more expensive and therefore pose a luxury good. *WEtell's* tariffs, which encapsulate all its values, are more costly than comparable options. However, as Mareike Kühnel points out, “I believe that sustainable and, above all, fairly produced services are not actually too expensive; rather, they have the price they are truly worth, and everything else is too cheap.”

Recognising that some people cannot afford fair and sustainable mobile communication, *WEtell* launched the “FAIRstärker” initiative. This allows regular customers to opt to pay more, enabling financially disadvantaged customers to access services at reduced rates.

*WEtell's* value of fairness also extends to its relationships with customers. The company promises fair and respectful service – no computers, no waiting line. This is in line with its loving and respectful relationships throughout. As Nico Tucher recalls,

“I was at a trade fair recently, and a woman came up to me—she must have been in her early 50s. She wanted to know what we do, so I explained and mentioned some technical details. Then I talked about our service, and I said, ‘When you call us, within 10 to 15 seconds, a real person picks up the phone and takes your issue seriously.’ The woman started tearing up. She said in today's digital world, everything is optimised for processes, but no one really takes you seriously as a human when you call a customer hotline.”

## Impact Measurement

From the outset, *WEtell* has been deeply invested in measuring and communicating its impact. The company has completed its second Economy of the Common Good

Balance Sheet, achieving an above-average score of 547 points<sup>1</sup>, which reflects its commitment to transparency and social responsibility. This score serves as a tangible metric that highlights *WEtell's* efforts to operate in line with the principles of the Economy of the Common Good.

“Of course, we have a lot of KPIs, especially in marketing, where a lot is about how many sales came in or how many people visited our homepage. So, there are these classic things where you can simply check if what we're doing is resonating. Personally, I also think, well, we've now done the second Common Good Balance Sheet, and I was involved in both, as I helped write the report. For me, that was a really beautiful way to see what we have achieved.” – Mareike Kühnel

*WEtell* also closely monitors other key performance indicators, including its energy production and consumption. The company tracks the amount of energy it produces from renewable sources and ensures that its mobile telecommunication services are powered by green energy. In addition, *WEtell* keeps detailed records of how many FAIRstärkers they have been able to engage.

## How the Purpose of Regenerative and Distributive Mobile Telecommunication is Embedded across the Design of the Business

### Ownership Design

Early on, *WEtell* questioned how to safeguard its purpose as the company grew and faced potential profit-driven temptations. Its solution was the steward-ownership model. It did not take long for *WEtell* to embrace this model, integrating it into its business structure to ensure long-term purpose alignment.

As a steward-owned company, *WEtell* operates with three distinct types of shares.

- **A-shares (majority shares):** Owned by those actively working at the company, these shares ensure that only insiders who understand the business make critical decisions.
- **B-Shares:** Hold veto rights for decisions affecting the company's fundamental purpose such as selling the company. In *WEtell's* case, 1% of the voting rights (B-Shares) are held by the Purpose Foundation.

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1 A maximum of 1,000 Common Good points can be achieved. Minus points are awarded for practices that are detrimental to the Common Good, which can amount to a maximum of minus 3,600 points. On average, companies have scored 300 points in 2017 (Felber/Hagelberg 2017).

- **C-Shares:** Granted to founders to compensate for their initial risk and investment. These shares do not influence decision-making and eventually become void after payout, returning to *WEtell* GmbH.

By anchoring its purpose through steward-ownership, *WEtell* ensures that it always prioritises sustainable mobile phone networks. As profits are reinvested into the company instead of given to shareholders, *WEtell* has the freedom to allocate its finances toward its purpose. For example, 3.9% of its expenditure is dedicated to building photovoltaic stations or carbon capture projects. Moreover, removing the pressure to maximise profit enables *WEtell* to choose its partners based on sustainability criteria rather than profit potential.

Furthermore, the steward-ownership model prevents power from being concentrated with external shareholders or investors. Instead, decision-making power remains with active members of the company. *WEtell* supports decentralised decision-making, giving employees a direct role in shaping the company's future. The founding team, alongside employees, actively participates in governance, reinforcing a culture of transparency and shared responsibility.

## Governance Design

The governance of *WEtell* is structured to ensure active involvement in the company. Decision-making power is distributed among *WEtell*'s steward-owners, who hold equal voting shares. Currently, these voting shares are divided among four individuals: the founders Alma Spribille, Andreas Schmucker, and Nico Tucher, as well as Ian Davidson, *WEtell*'s brand lead, who played a key role in building the company's identity. All four hold equal voting rights and share strategic responsibility.

The number of voting shares is not fixed. Additional members could be included in the future, or the group could be reduced. Initially, the founders determined the composition of this circle, as their strategic roles naturally aligned with governance responsibilities. However, *WEtell* aims to develop a process that would allow other employees to take part in governance decisions over time.

Operationally, *WEtell* functions with flat hierarchies and a trust-based culture, where open communication is encouraged. Employees are actively involved in decision-making processes and can voice their opinions freely without fear of repercussion. For instance, *WEtell* implements the SCRUM method for regular strategy and values alignment meetings, and employees even participate in financial planning discussions. This collective approach fosters a sense of shared ownership and purpose.

The company's ownership structure, free from external influences, allows the founding team to delegate decision-making authority to the most relevant experts

within *WEtell*. For example, the service team independently sets its own priorities and strategies for smaller projects, consulting the founders primarily for support.

Decision-making at *WEtell* is deeply collaborative. While most decisions are made within smaller working units, key decisions are often discussed with the entire team. The goal is to find solutions that everyone can accept. For major decisions, the team votes with veto rights, and if no consensus is reached, they apply the principle of minimal resistance to find a solution that the majority agrees with.

“Our business practice is that we don't vote on the vast majority of things but aim to find a solution that everyone can live with. [...] It's very rare for there to be any kind of contentious votes.” — Nico Tucher

## Network Design

Awareness of environmental issues like climate change and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions is crucial for consumers to make informed decisions when choosing a mobile network provider like *WEtell*. However, many people are unaware that their choice impacts more than just price and data availability: it also affects privacy, CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, and working conditions. To bridge this knowledge gap, *WEtell* places its network at the core of its mission.

*WEtell* not only educates its customers and partners but also engages the broader public. In 2022, the team participated in 14 podcast interviews, designed workshops around sustainable phones, and took part in Fridays for Future protests. The company also created a network around the protests on Lüzérath, where activists opposed the demolition of the village for coal mining expansion, to raise awareness for climate action. Its presence in the sustainability space is extensive and few podcasts on the topic have not featured *WEtell*. Beyond public engagement, they also focus on educating policymakers, and actively lobby for climate protection measures.

“That's why *WEtell* is also active in this area. For example, through its work on the board of the German Sustainable Economy Association or Alma Spribille's involvement in the SME Advisory Board of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate Action. In this way, we push decisions towards sustainability and contribute our ideas and expertise to the process.” — Nico Tucher

## Trust

A key aspect of embedding purpose into organisational design is establishing trust, especially in a climate where public scepticism towards sustainability claims runs high. Many startups with initially strong sustainability credentials have experienced

backlash after scaling or exiting, leading to growing public doubt about whether companies can remain true to their values over time.

Nico Tucher recalls a customer conversation that highlighted this issue: while he was explaining *WEtell*'s mission and his commitment to never selling the company, the customer responded with a sceptical laugh. 'I believe you now. But what will it be like in five years' time? You can't say for sure yourself what it will be like then, then you want to scale. And the scaling point is often the point at which you leave this path, the values.'

To address this scepticism, *WEtell* combines measurable impact with a purpose-focused legal form that is explicitly designed to protect its core mission. While the company rigorously measures and communicates its impact through technical data, it also acknowledges that most people neither have the time nor the expertise to analyse these complexities. This is where *WEtell*'s purpose becomes a powerful differentiator: it builds an emotional connection that bridges the gap between hard facts and human trust.

"But most people are not primarily technically minded and, above all, they are not experts in the field. This means that what we actually need to achieve is to precisely convey these emotions. Trust." – Nico Tucher

## Culture

*WEtell*'s corporate culture is a key driver of its success. The purpose-driven mindset and flat hierarchies foster a sense of empowerment and engagement among employees. Many team members joined *WEtell* after experiencing a disconnect between their personal values and previous work environments. At *WEtell*, they discovered a place where they could not only align their sense of purpose with their work but also actively contribute to shaping the company's culture. This alignment leads to high levels of personal fulfilment, as one employee noted:

"I came from a company that wasn't very value-driven. And I just really wanted [...] to go somewhere where I could do meaningful work. And I never would have thought of working for a mobile network provider." – Mareike Kühnel

Transparency is central to *WEtell*'s culture. The entire team is regularly updated on and involved in the company's financial situation, strategic direction, and future scenarios. This openness ensures that all employees understand the state of the company, can voice concerns, and gain insights into the long-term vision, reinforcing their trust and commitment to *WEtell*'s purpose.

## Challenges Arising from Designing Purpose around Regenerative and Distributive Mobile Communications

### Protecting *WEtell*'s Values

Even with purpose embedded in its legal and financial structure, *WEtell* is not immune to difficult decisions. As the company grows, it continually faces moments where its commitment to its values must be carefully balanced against the pressures and opportunities that come with scaling. Inevitably, trade-offs arise that require *WEtell* to make deliberate choices about its priorities.

### Example: Discount System for Customers

A typical example involves balancing trade-offs between growth and *WEtell*'s commitment to fairness for all customers. On one occasion, a major client requested 500 SIM cards and expected a significant discount in return. This demand sparked an internal debate: *WEtell*'s principles of fairness and transparency clashed with the customer's expectations. The issue was not merely about the financial decision; it was about maintaining trustworthiness. Offering a discount to one large customer could compromise the company's promise of treating all customers equally, undermining the trust it had worked so hard to build. To uphold its values, *WEtell* introduced a transparent and fair discount system for customers who purchase large quantities of SIM cards. While quietly providing a bespoke and negotiated discount would have been easier and more commercially effective, the company chose transparency and reinforced its values while also adapting to commercial realities.

### Example: Introducing a Transparent Wage System

A powerful example of *WEtell*'s collaborative culture is the recent introduction of a transparent wage system in October 2023. The decision arose from the recognition that the existing system no longer reflected market realities, particularly for specialised skills. The founders invited a team of employees to co-create a new, fairer wage model. This group, which represented different parts of the company, worked through various options and gathered feedback from the entire staff to ensure the solution would be both competitive and transparent.

The process was not just technical but emotional. Discussing wages openly revealed how deeply money and fairness are connected, even for those who primarily view work through a values-driven lens. Mareike Kühnel reflected on this, noting that "it was kind of an emotional moment to realise, oh, something actually did happen, and it's totally crazy because you don't really want to tie emotions to money. You want to focus on the idealistic existence."

Ultimately, the team proposed three models, and after collective discussion and a company-wide vote in which every employee had the right to veto, a new system was accepted unanimously. It is grounded in three guiding principles: recognizing the level of responsibility each role entails, ensuring salaries remain competitive with the market, and maintaining a fair balance by capping the highest salary at twice the lowest. In addition, the system includes the FAIRteiler, a flexible budget that allows employees to temporarily or permanently top up their salary to accommodate personal needs, such as caring for relatives or covering unexpected expenses.

## Measurement of Societal Impact

While quantitative metrics like energy usage, CO<sub>2</sub> compensation or the number of FAIRstärkers are relatively easy to track, other areas of impact, especially those related to public influence, are more challenging to quantify.

A good example is the recent appointment of Alma Spribille to the executive board of an influential mobile telecommunications association. Through this role, Alma Spribille has the opportunity to actively promote sustainability in the mobile telecommunications industry and shape policies that could lead to more sustainable practices across the sector. However, the true impact of these activities is difficult to measure concretely. Political influence and long-term advocacy efforts, while vital for systemic change, often do not lend themselves to immediate or easily measurable outcomes.

## Recommendations for Adopting a Regenerative and Distributive Purpose Design

### Ensure Financial Independence

When seeking external funding, avoid becoming dependent on investors by retaining full decision-making power. Instead of granting voting rights to investors, opt for alternative financing models such as crowdfunding or crowdinvesting, which align better with long-term sustainability goals.

### Embed Regenerative and Distributive Design from the Start

Integrating sustainability and the common good into your business model early on makes implementation significantly easier. A proactive approach ensures that regenerative and distributive considerations become a natural part of operations rather than an afterthought. Using Economy of the Common Good accounting can further support internal evaluation and highlight areas for development.

### Engage Your Team in the Process

Employees are more committed to sustainability when they are actively involved in shaping initiatives rather than simply following imposed measures. Encouraging team participation fosters accountability and innovation, as more people contribute to identifying areas for improvement.

### Inspiring Redesign Beyond the Business

*WEtell* sees itself as part of a broader movement toward a more sustainable and fair economic system, which aligns with the principles of the Doughnut Economy. While promoting fairness and transparency as its social responsibility, the company also focuses on regeneration on the ecological level by producing its own green energy. *WEtell's* approach is about inspiring others to adopt similar values, with the ultimate goal of transforming the industry and contributing to a more equitable economy. As Mareike Kühnel recalls *WEtell's* founders saying: “If we go bankrupt because everyone else is working as sustainably and fairly as we do, then we’ve reached our goal. And then we’ll just find another branch and keep going.”

## References

### Interview

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