

## CORPORATE COMMUNICATORS AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS PROFESSIONALS ARE NAVIGATING A

CHAOTIC AND UNPREDICTABLE LANDSCAPE





### The second Trump administration is playing out as a worst-case scenario for companies of virtually all sizes.

Corporate communicators and public affairs professionals are navigating a chaotic and unpredictable policy landscape – from tariffs, to investigations, to industry-changing executive orders – coupled with an increasingly fractured media environment where it's harder than ever to communicate efficiently.

Risks associated with external and internal communications from a brand or individual executive have amplified, and the consequences of an error are more severe. At the same time, the loss of trust in institutions, including corporations and traditional media sources, requires communicators to adapt by developing strategies for building and protecting their organization's reputation.



GSG set out to determine where Americans go for trusted information, who they trust to provide that information, whether they view the current political and economic disruption as positive or negative, and how communications and public affairs professionals can confront an objectively challenging landscape successfully.

To do so, we surveyed 1,000 voters nationwide and conducted a series of off-the-record, in-depth interviews with experienced corporate communicators. The following report contains insights from our survey research and the industry experts we interviewed.





### **TRENDS**

There is a delicate balance that must be struck between reacting to external events to reassure your audiences and picking the right moments to drive key narratives proactively.

Based on our survey research, in-depth interviews, and experience counseling private sector and non-profit leaders, we see the following trends shaping the communications landscape.

#### Some consumers don't believe what they hear, even from sources they seek out

This view is fueled by extremely low trust in large companies, government, and media that is still trending downward, and an increasingly fractured information landscape. Small businesses, which maintain high trust numbers, are the only exception to declining confidence.

### Given their frustrations with the status quo, Americans don't see all change as bad, especially in specific industries

The backdrop for this sentiment is that Americans continue to believe the country is headed in the wrong direction, so it's wrong to assume that all change is inherently negative. It's not. Across several sectors, like energy, manufacturing, and transportation, consumers believe the disruption will bring positive change. This is an important framing to keep in mind as there may be more opportunity to tell a positive story about how your industry and organization is changing or evolving over the next several years.

#### CEOs are not viewed as the credible messengers they once were

Consumers report relatively low levels of trust in direct communications from CEOs, reflecting a decline after overexposure of CEOs during the first Trump Administration and COVID-19 era. This highlights the need to be mindful of where and how executives are being deployed to communicate. It reinforces the importance of pairing the right messenger with the right message when communicating with your core audiences.

### Political news consumption is shifting to non-traditional channels, but corporate news consumption is lagging behind

The political news landscape has shifted massively over the past few years, with more reliance on nontraditional channels like podcasts and YouTube – particularly on the right – and more consumers relying on algorithms to deliver news to them. Corporate news consumption, however, is evolving more slowly: traditional media channels like national and local TV still carry weight for consumers looking for information about companies.



# TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS AND INDUSTRY SHIFTS

# TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS — ACROSS BIG BUSINESS, MEDIA, AND GOVERNMENT — IS AT AN ALL-TIME LOW

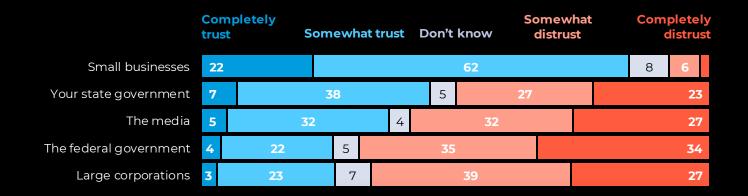
Corporate communicators are operating from a place of low credibility. Only 3% of Americans report completely trusting large corporations, while 23% somewhat trust them — comparable with trust levels in the federal government.



### WORSE YET, 41% OF CONSUMERS REPORT THAT THEY'VE

### LOST TRUST IN LARGE CORPORATIONS OVER THE PAST YEAR

Below is a short list of groups and organizations. Please indicate how much you trust or distrust each.





SMALL BUSINESSES WERE THE ONLY INSTITUTION TESTED THAT A MAJORITY OF AMERICANS (84%)

REPORTED SOMEWHAT OR COMPLETELY TRUSTING

Small businesses benefit from close, personal connectivity with their customers and stakeholders. In this environment, larger companies should double down on efforts to strengthen their relationships with their core audiences.



POLITICS AND WORLD EVENTS HAVE CHANGED THE RISK LANDSCAPE, BUT IT HASN'T CHANGED OUR APPROACH.

IF ANYTHING, WE'RE

RATCHETING UP ENGAGEMENT.

— Director of Corporate Communications

# CONSUMERS WILL CONTINUE TO EXPERIENCE MAJOR CHANGE OVER THE NEXT FOUR YEARS

In the first 100 days of the Trump administration, Americans saw fundamental changes that hit every part of the economy from artificial intelligence to healthcare to manufacturing, and energy.



Since Americans hold negative sentiment toward business as usual, they do not view all change as negative. In fact, many see change in certain industries – such as energy, manufacturing, and transportation – as having the potential to bring positive outcomes to consumers. They are more mixed about how Al will impact them and fear negative change in healthcare. Because of this, it's essential for corporate communicators to manage expectations and emphasize how your company is delivering for core audiences.

Do you think the changes in \_\_\_\_\_ will be more positive or more negative for consumers?

	Much mor	e So	Somewhat				newl	nat	<b>Much more</b>		% Much More Positive			
	positive	mor	e posit	tive No	t sure	more	neg	ative	nega	tive	<55	55+	Men	Women
Energy*	43					34			17	4	45	42	44	41
Manufacturing*	37				31		6	12		14	27	51	40	33
Social Media*	35			22		22	2		22	0	28	67	42	28
Transportation*	17			54				27	7		12	25		23
Artificial Intelligence*	15		34		16	5		24		12	18	10	20	8
Healthcare*	13	14	6	20						47	17	7	16	12



I THINK THE LAST THING YOU WANT TO DO IN A CHAOTIC ENVIRONMENT IS ADD TO THE CHAOS. YOU WANT TO BRING SOME ORDER TO IT AND HELP PEOPLE DIGEST THINGS IN A WAY THAT IS CALMER AND MORE STREAMLINED.

— General Counsel

### THE MEDIA LANDSCAPE



Increasing shares of Americans are looking to social platforms, independent creators, and other non-traditional sources for their news.

### HOWEVER, LOCAL TV AND NATIONAL BROADCAST NEWS

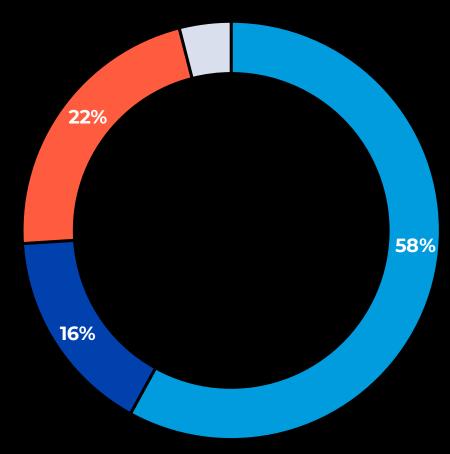
RETAIN HIGH LEVELS OF USAGE,

### PARTICULARLY AMONG AMERICANS OVER THE AGE OF 55

In terms of trust, older Americans and Democrats report higher levels of trust in traditional media, while Younger Americans, independents, and men reported higher levels of trust in independent creators.

[TOP TWO] Overall, when it comes to getting your news, which one of the following do you use MOST?



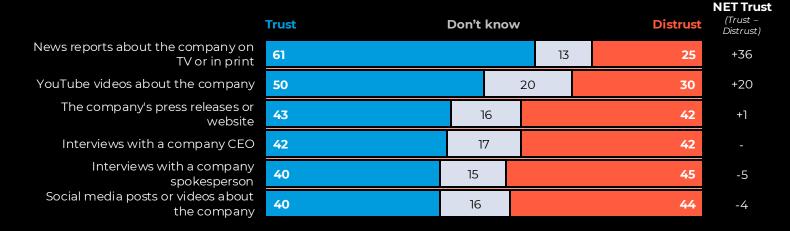




# TRUST IN COMPANIES IS LOW ACROSS CHANNELS, WITH ONLY A FEW TRUSTED BY A MAJORITY OF AMERICANS

The relatively higher levels of trust in company news from traditional TV and print media sources (61%) underscores the value of a traditional earned media engagement strategy – but new media channels like YouTube are increasingly important.

How much do you trust or distrust what you hear about a company from each of the following sources?







# CONSUMERS — ESPECIALLY PEOPLE UNDER 55 — REPORT HIGHER LEVELS OF TRUST IN

COMPANY NEWS THEY
SEE THROUGH CHANNELS
LIKE YOUTUBE

Corporate communicators should ensure that they are spending time developing their owned media channels.

While consumers are split on trusting news from company press releases and websites, the ability to control your message on these platforms makes them more valuable in chaotic times.



IN TODAY'S LOW-TRUST ENVIRONMENT, IT'S MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER THAT

CORPORATE COMMUNICATORS MEET
AMERICANS WHERE THEY ARE

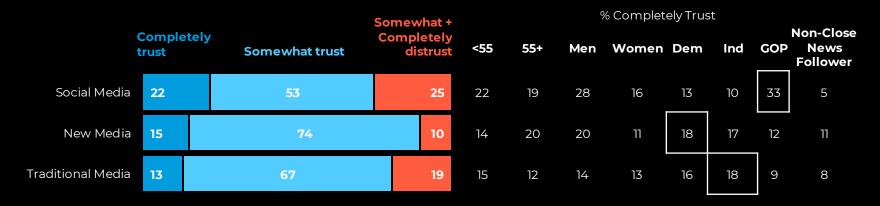
WITH COMPELLING MESSAGING.

### Americans report low levels of trust in both new and traditional media, even the sources they say they use the most for their news.

No news source – social media, traditional media, or new media – is completely trusted by more than 22% of Americans, and the "completely trust" numbers mirror the "distrust" numbers, even for Americans' mostused news sources.

To win over skeptical audiences, your messaging should be authentic, based on clear business goals, and connected to the company's vision and values. Beyond messaging, companies need to match talk with action to show stakeholders what they have done, not just what they are planning to do. This requires integration with all parts of the company – HR, sales, marketing, etc. – to support their communications activities as well.

Overall, how much do you trust or distrust the news you see or hear on... [FIRST CHOICE MEDIA SOURCE]





YOU'VE GOT TO HAVE AN ORGANIZATION THAT HAS VALUES THAT IT BELIEVES IN, THE NORTH STAR,

AND THEN YOU HAVE TO HAVE RULES AROUND WHAT YOU WANT TO ENGAGE IN THAT YOU STICK TO.

— Director of Corporate Communications



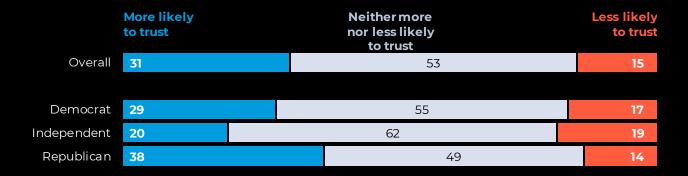
### AMERICANS ARE UNCERTAIN ABOUT

DIRECT COMMUNICATIONS FROM CEOs

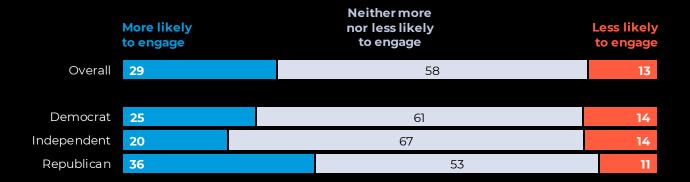
The majority of Americans (53%) say they are neither more nor less likely to trust a company after hearing directly from their CEO. Only a relatively small number (32%) say they would trust a company more. This uncertainty shows there is work to be done to rehab executive communications to enhance their effectiveness.



#### How much more likely or unlikely are you to trust a company after hearing directly from their CEO on an issue that applies to their business?



Are you more or less likely to engage with a company after hearing from their CEO on an issue?



Post-COVID-19, CEOs took on a larger communications role for their companies and on social issues. This amount of exposure, along with other factors, may have led to an erosion of trust among consumers.

In conversations with top-level corporate communicators, we heard that companies are being more selective in thought leadership and executive visibility opportunities in the new environment. Moving forward, C-level communications should have a clear goal and meet your intended audiences where they are with messaging on a subject or value where there is alignment.



66THERE WAS A LACK OF TRUST IN GOVERNMENT AND SO PEOPLE LOOKED TO THEIR CEOs. WHICH IS WHY YOU HAD ALL THESE CEOS COMMENTING ON THINGS THAT THEY NORMALLY WOULDN'T COMMENT ON.

— General Counsel

### RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Hit reset.

The chaos of this moment has far exceeded what most people expected. The strategic communications plan for the year doesn't need to be thrown out, but it likely needs a refresh. Challenge all aspects of your plan to fine-tune messaging, messengers, and the channels you are going to invest in to reach your audiences.

#### Attune your "riskometer."

CEO-level communications are riskier in this environment. The consequences are greater for the organization and executives personally. The old standard for evaluating the risk of a message, interview, or social post needs to evolve. Additionally, the factors you consider when calculating risk and reward must account for the low trust, but optimistic attitudes of the public – because opportunities are out there. Finally, the new risk evaluation should be done more frequently and with an expanded set of internal stakeholders.

#### Run your own race.

In chaotic times, it is best to prioritize communications that are directly related to your business goals. Since 2016, C-level executives stepped in to fill a void in leadership and their stakeholders and the public responded well - that's changed significantly amidst today's noise. We recommend tethering your communications to clear business narratives and company mission.

#### Invest in owned media.

When it comes to corporate news, people are still turning to traditional media and your channels – including websites, press releases, and YouTube – for reliable information. This means updating and expanding, not throwing out, your earned media plans. You should absolutely find creative ways to engage with audiences on new platforms and incorporate more podcasts and independent content creators into your earned media mix. But it's equally important to make sure you are creating engaging content for your website and, increasingly, your YouTube channel.



### COMMUNICATING IN CHAOS

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**Methodology:** Global Strategy Group conducted a public opinion survey among 1,000 registered voters nationwide between February 26 – March 2, 2025 and has a confidence interval of +/- 3.1%. Margin of error on subgroups is greater. The survey was conducted online, recruiting respondents from a leading opt-in panel vendor.

