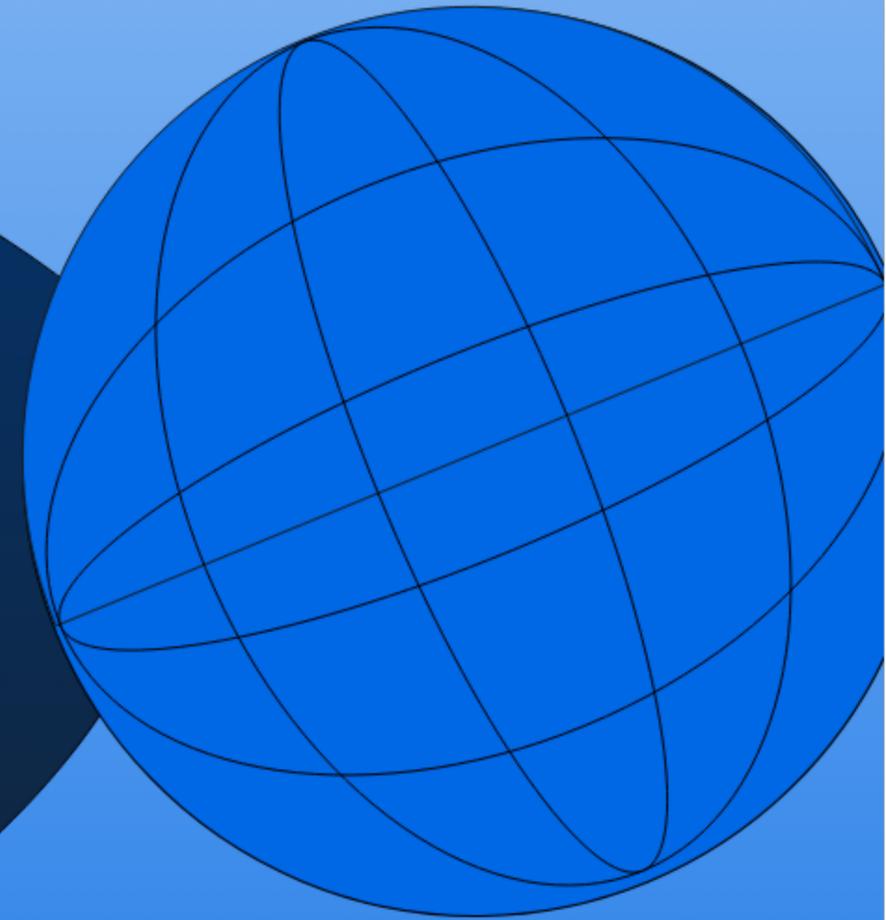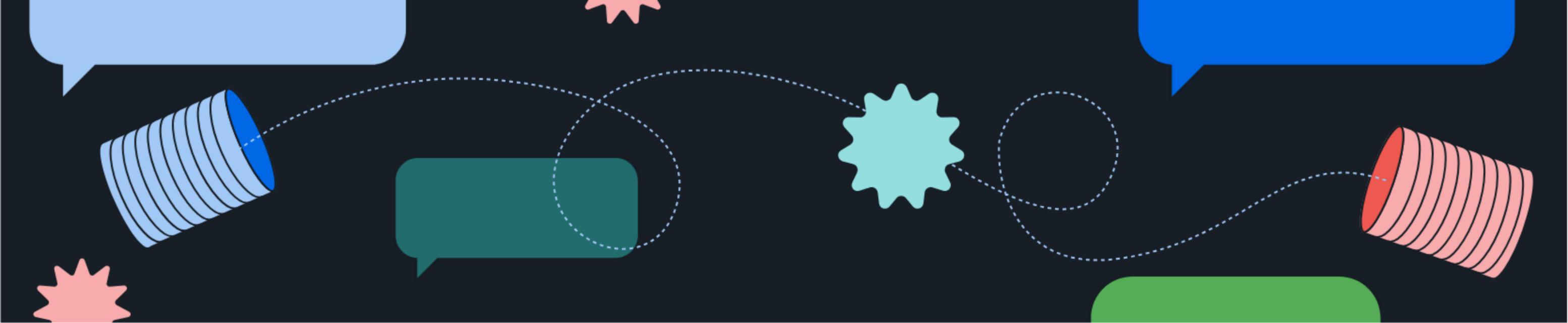# The New Rules of Trust

Brand Expectations Index 2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Brands must earn your trust.

According to our Third Annual Brand Expectations Index, people are demanding more from organizations and their leaders than they did last year.

They prefer authenticity and honesty over bluster and blame-shifting, and they want to hear from credible problem-solvers instead of CEOs who are front and center 24/7.

The hallmarks of authenticity and credibility shift conventional wisdom for communicators. Promoting experts who are closest to the facts fosters trust, especially during crises. Likewise, favoring restraint and accuracy over presence, and potentially rushed claims, bolsters faith in brands and leaders.

AI is the new stress test for corporate leadership. **Trust in AI comes with contingencies:** while respondents to our survey are open to AI use in business operations, they're skeptical when it makes critical business decisions.

For communicators, the message is clear: Trust is conditional. It is earned through restraint, accuracy, and follow-through. People want leaders who prioritize doing the right thing over being the loudest voice. The survey reinforces the critical discipline that trust-building starts long before a crisis, and is tested visibly when companies demonstrate that they are prepared to listen, course-correct, and protect the people who rely on them.

The survey findings provide evidence-based justification for communicators to push back on vanity-focused strategies, such as the common "CEO-on-TV" playbook that prioritizes visibility. The survey proves what communications pros know instinctively: Trust comes from precision engagement – the right person, right platform, and right message – and not from maximizing broadcast exposure or touting placement metrics.

METHODOLOGY

The Brand Expectations Index (BEx 2026) project was designed to understand how CEOs, CCOs and CMOs can improve their brand's reputation and avoid actions that harm it.

The study was conducted in November 2025 on a representative sample of U.S. adults. Its survey includes 1,049 adults from the general population; it also includes 501 knowledge workers –defined as individuals who create value for organizations through specialized expertise, professional judgment, or decision-making responsibility.

Respondents reflect broad geographic, demographic, and political diversity across the United States, with general population results weighted to standard national benchmarks for age, gender, region, educational attainment, and race/ethnicity. Knowledge workers were additionally screened to ensure proximity to organizational decision-making and professional expertise across sectors.

BEx 2026 is the third annual Brand Expectations Index. It builds on insights from prior years to identify current expectations of corporate leadership, and how those expectations are shifting over time, particularly in moments of institutional stress, technological change, and heightened public scrutiny.
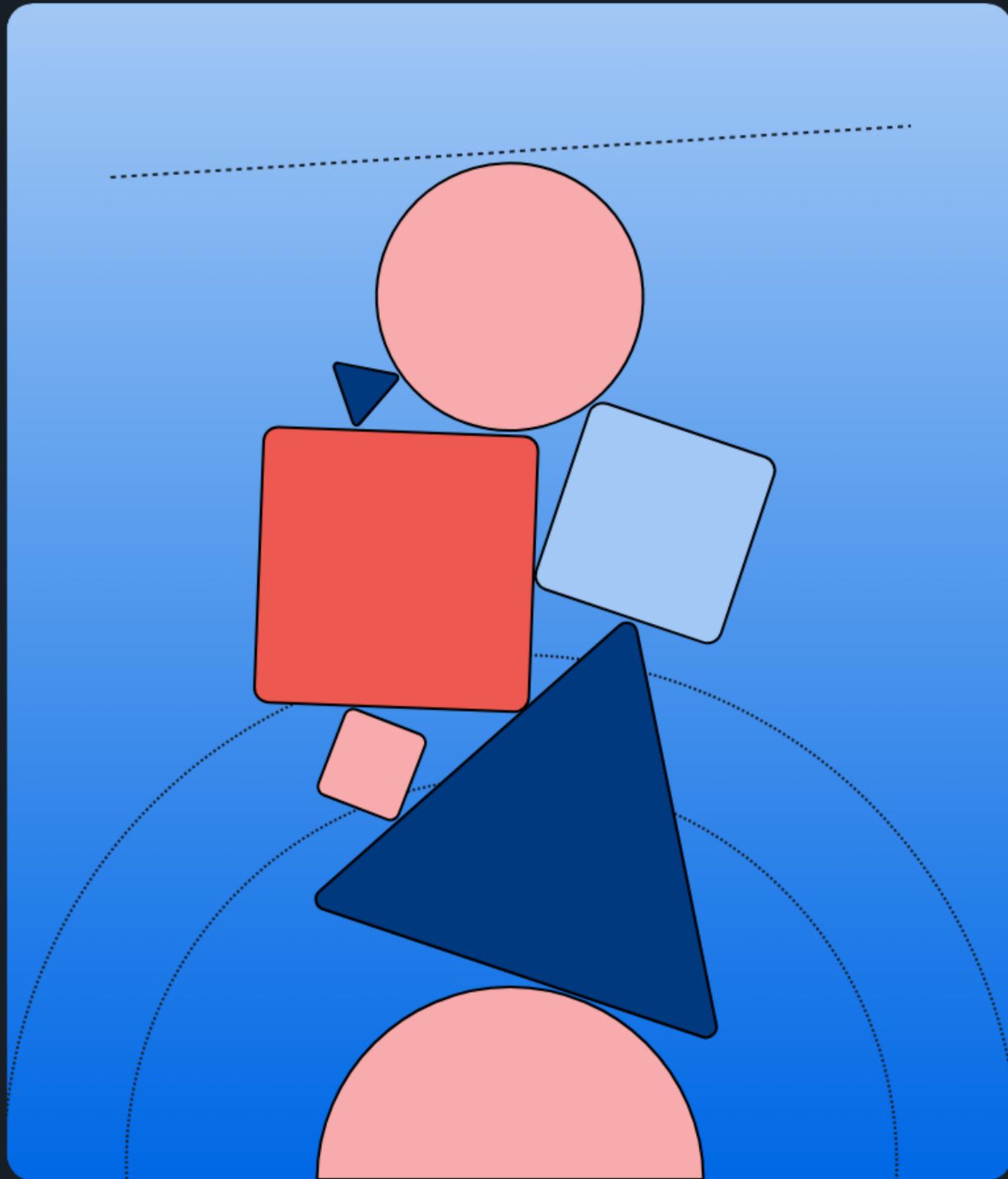
What is trust, and why does it matter?

This year's Brand Expectations Index focuses on people's trust in leaders and organizations. We define trust as the confidence placed in a company's behavior when there is uncertainty, risk, or failure.

Why does trust matter? It determines whether audiences extend patience, forgiveness, and legitimacy when things go wrong. Trust is built by what brands and leaders do, not what they say. It's about behavior, not rhetoric. Being bold may win likes and followers – but that's not trust.

Trust requires authenticity, which includes admitting mistakes, listening, and communicating. These actions matter more to audiences than confidence and visibility – especially in a crisis.

Resistance to AI – when it replaces human judgment

The survey shows that people are willing to trust AI, but only under certain conditions. Audiences are open to AI being used in business operations, but that openness and trust requires **transparency, human oversight, and clear accountability.** Across all respondents and knowledge workers, the data reveal a clear hierarchy: AI is welcomed when it improves efficiency and experience, tolerated when it operates behind the scenes, and resisted when it appears to replace human judgment, authority, or accountability.

The communicator's takeaway: Trust in a brand's AI adoption does not come from novelty or speed, but from clarity, disclosure, and human-centered framing. The best approach is to advise brand leaders to highlight the critical thinkers and curious collaborators who make the organization successful. AI should be used to support thinkers, not replace them.
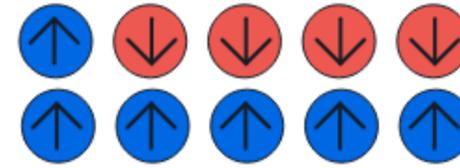
Respondents are comfortable with AI used in business functions

Among all respondents, most people are comfortable with companies using AI applications for everyday business functions like generating marketing copy (55%), personalizing products or recommendations (55%), answering their customer service questions (54%), and generating code for new digital products (53%).

Knowledge workers even more comfortable with AI in business

Knowledge workers' comfort levels with AI are relatively high across everyday tasks like personalization, customer service, marketing content development, and code generation. As we see it, AI is already embedded in professional workflows for this segment of respondents, so skepticism is the exception rather than the rule.
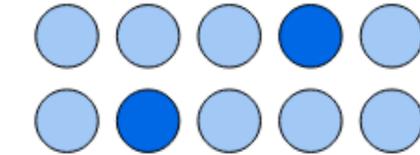

AI as a decision-maker: A bridge too far?

However, in looking at all respondents' views of AI, comfort turns to uneasiness when people are asked about AI's use for automating critical business functions like cybersecurity (52% not comfortable), generating legal or policy documents (55% not comfortable), making HR decisions (58%), and creating AI avatars of executives for public statements (56%). These reactions indicate that humans must remain visibly responsible for high-stakes decision making like hiring and firing.

Knowledge workers more accepting of AI decision-making

While knowledge workers are mostly comfortable with the idea of businesses using AI for HR applications (62%) and using AI avatars for executive statements (63%), they're even more accepting of AI used for simpler functions like answering customer service questions (76%). Knowledge workers seem more willing to accept AI's role, but still expect guardrails.

> "The issue isn't whether leaders use AI; it's whether they remain **accountable for what's said in their name**.
>
> When audiences feel that responsibility is being automated or obscured, trust drops immediately. **Transparency is the trust multiplier**."

Tyler Perry | Co-CEO
Mission North

The AI Trust Penalty

Undisclosed AI executive messaging carries a measurable trust penalty: 73% of general population respondents and 67% of knowledge workers say it would reduce their trust. The signal is clear – audiences accept AI tools, but even the more AI-comfortable knowledge worker audience expects leaders to remain visibly responsible for what's said in their name.
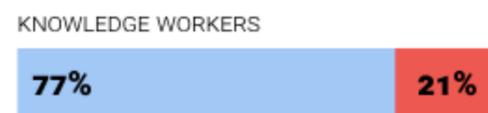
GUIDELINES FOR COMMUNICATORS:

1. Disclose meaningful AI involvement in executive messaging.

2. Maintain visible human accountability.

3. Govern synthetic communication like you would financial or legal risk.

QUESTION:

How comfortable are you with companies using AI for each of the following:
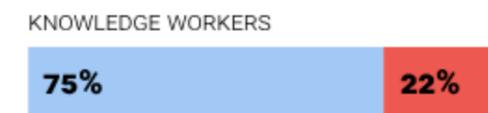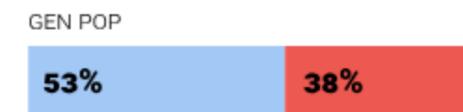
GENERATING MARKETING COPY, OR ADS

GEN POP
55% | 38%

KNOWLEDGE WORKERS
77% | 21%

PERSONALIZING PRODUCTS OR RECOMMENDATIONS

GEN POP
55% | 38%

KNOWLEDGE WORKERS
78% | 19%

ANSWERING CUSTOMER SERVICE QUESTIONS

GEN POP
54% | 41%

KNOWLEDGE WORKERS
76% | 22%

GENERATING CODE FOR NEW DIGITAL PRODUCTS

GEN POP
53% | 38%

KNOWLEDGE WORKERS
75% | 22%

AUTOMATING CRITICAL BUSINESS FUNCTIONS LIKE CYBERSECURITY

GEN POP
41% | 52%

KNOWLEDGE WORKERS
65% | 33%
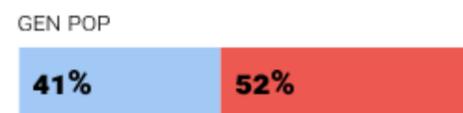
■ COMFORTABLE ■ UNCOMFORTABLE

Proximity and people foster institutional trust

This year's survey shows that trust is more easily won locally than globally. Communicators at many consumer-facing institutions in American life, as well as their leaders, have their work cut out for them.

The data also reveals a structural trust divide between audiences. **Knowledge workers report significantly higher trust in institutions than the general population:** trust in Big Tech is 58% among knowledge workers vs 34% among general population respondents; trust in AI companies is 58% vs 28%. Companies operating primarily in B2B or enterprise environments start with a higher baseline of institutional trust. Consumer-facing brands, by contrast, face a steeper trust climb — particularly when operating at a national scale.

The trust people place in institutions perceived as **local, practical, and people-centered** has remained steady and durable over three years of tracking. This aligns with audiences' greater trust in leaders and organizations that emphasize authenticity and responsibility. State and local governments are more trusted than the federal government, reflecting the perceived values of **proximity and accountability**.

Small businesses are most trusted

Among the general population, small businesses remain the most trusted institution type (68% trust) since the 2025 survey, followed by higher education (60%) and healthcare (57%). These rankings have remained consistent over three years of tracking, underscoring the durability of trust in institutions perceived as local, practical, and people-centered.
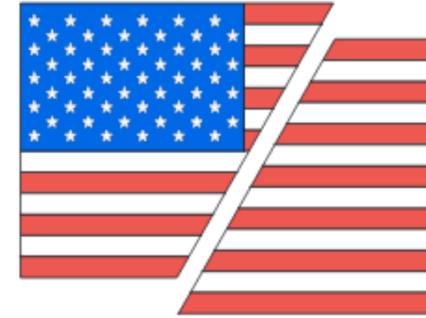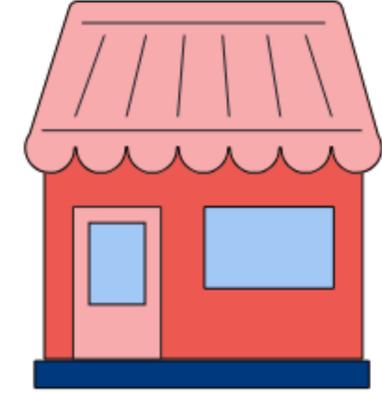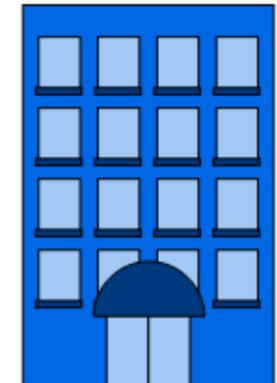
Federal government, not so much

Trust in the federal government (28%) is well below state and local government (37%). While "government" as a monolith remains distrusted, proximity and perceived accountability appear to soften skepticism.
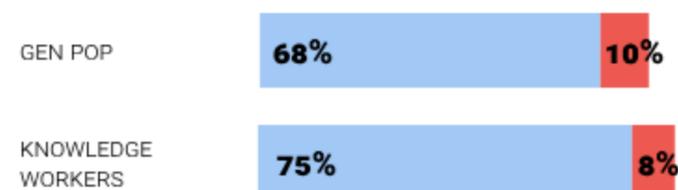
Knowledge workers more trusting of institutions

Among knowledge workers, trust levels are significantly higher across nearly every institution, including banks (+15 points vs. general population), media (+20), technology companies (+24), and AI startups (+30). However, the ranking order of institutions is similar to that shown among the general population. Small businesses, education, and healthcare anchor trust for both audiences, while social media, venture capital, and AI companies continue to rank lower.
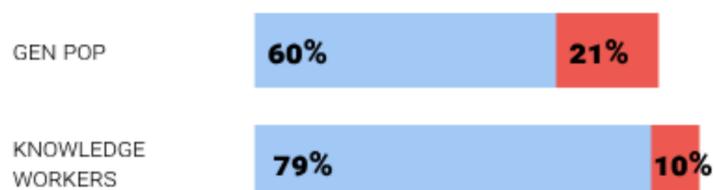
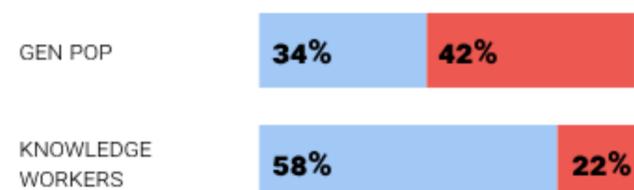# Please indicate how much trust you have, if any, in each of the following institutions in American society.
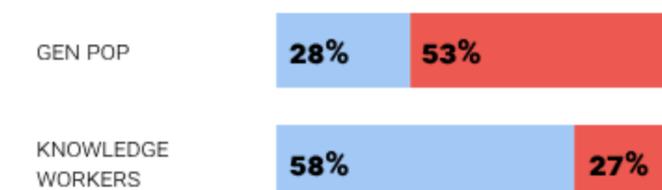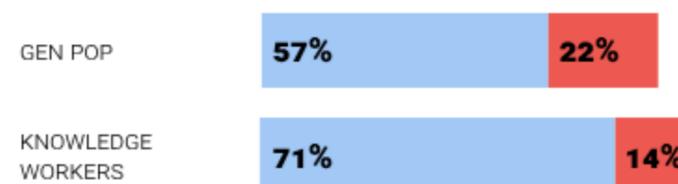
SMALL BUSINESSES

	TRUST	NOT TRUST
GEN POP	68%	10%
KNOWLEDGE WORKERS	75%	8%

HIGHER EDUCATION

	TRUST	NOT TRUST
GEN POP	60%	21%
KNOWLEDGE WORKERS	79%	10%

BIG TECH

	TRUST	NOT TRUST
GEN POP	34%	42%
KNOWLEDGE WORKERS	58%	22%

AI STARTUPS

	TRUST	NOT TRUST
GEN POP	28%	53%
KNOWLEDGE WORKERS	58%	27%

HEALTHCARE

	TRUST	NOT TRUST
GEN POP	57%	22%
KNOWLEDGE WORKERS	71%	14%

BANKS

	TRUST	NOT TRUST
GEN POP	53%	23%
KNOWLEDGE WORKERS	68%	13%

SOCIAL MEDIA

	TRUST	NOT TRUST
GEN POP	28%	52%
KNOWLEDGE WORKERS	50%	32%

NEWS MEDIA

	TRUST	NOT TRUST
GEN POP	36%	45%
KNOWLEDGE WORKERS	56%	28%

STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

	TRUST	NOT TRUST
GEN POP	37%	42%
KNOWLEDGE WORKERS	57%	27%

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

	TRUST	NOT TRUST
GEN POP	28%	55%
KNOWLEDGE WORKERS	49%	32%

TRUST   NOT TRUST

Why are knowledge workers more trusting of institutions?

Trust levels among the general population and knowledge workers are moving in opposite directions on social media. In the 2026 survey, 28% of general population respondents said they trusted social media – compared to 30% in the 2025 survey.

However, 50% of knowledge workers said they trusted social media – almost twice as high as the percentage of general population respondents, and 14 points higher than the 2025 survey.

The survey also shows different trust levels between the two audiences for startup businesses. Fifty-eight percent of knowledge workers said they trusted startups (an 8-point increase over the 2025 survey), while only 35% of general population respondents said they trusted startups. For AI-specific startup companies, trust dips among general population respondents (28%), while trust remains higher among knowledge workers (58%).

The gaps between these groups may reflect different thresholds for legitimacy. Knowledge workers are more willing to extend trust (likely because of their proximity to technology), but are also more attentive to how institutions behave when tested. For example, 77% of knowledge workers say it is better to withhold unverified information during a crisis, compared to 69% of general population respondents.

The general population tends to evaluate organizations based on visible outcomes, perceived harm, and cultural signals, and begins from a lower baseline of institutional trust. Knowledge workers, by contrast, report significantly higher trust in institutions such as Big Tech (58% vs. 34%) and AI companies (58% vs. 28%). That higher starting point does not translate into tolerance for governance failures, however. When asked about undisclosed AI-generated executive statements, 73% of the general population and 67% of knowledge workers say their trust would be reduced. Both audiences respond strongly to breaches of transparency, while their trust baselines differ.

58%
of knowledge workers said they trusted startups (a 8-point increase over the 2025 survey)

35%
of general population respondents said they trusted startups

73%
of the general population say undisclosed AI-generated executive statements reduce their trust.

Being clear and responsible > being seen

Communicating with speed and sensitivity – especially in a crisis – is PR 101. But the survey shows nuance among audiences in **how** and **when** leaders communicate, and in the communications styles that build trust rather than erode it.

Trust, say survey respondents, is not about being louder than everyone else, and it's not about being everywhere, all the time, in the media. Communicators' time is better spent coaching clients to tell the truth, listen to customers and constituents, and demonstrate responsible leadership.

When asked what increases trust during periods of uncertainty, the general population said commitment to diversity and employee experience (44%), environmental responsibility (43%), and personable CEO communication (43%) all outrank frequent media appearances (24%). Knowledge workers show the same pattern: 64% reward leadership commitment to employees, compared to 44% who say frequent executive visibility increases trust.

TRUST IS GAINED THROUGH DISCIPLINE, BY:

1. Protecting people from harm

2. Taking responsibility when things go wrong

3. Communicating with clarity and purpose

The gap between what leaders often prioritize (being seen) and what audiences actually reward (being responsible and clear) is one of the most consequential takeaways from this year's research. Attributes tied to clarity and accountability are the strongest trust multipliers, particularly among knowledge workers. In moments of disruption, audiences reward leaders with trust for being caring and understandable.

When considering your trust in a business or a company, how much do the following factors influence you?

DEMONSTRATING RESPONSIBILITY BY PROTECTING CUSTOMER PRIVACY OR DATA

GEN POP	66%
KNOWLEDGE WORKERS	75%

ADMITTING A MISTAKE AND OUTLINING STEPS TO FIX IT

GEN POP	66%
KNOWLEDGE WORKERS	75%

LISTENING TO FEEDBACK AND RESPONDING TO CONCERNS

GEN POP	61%
KNOWLEDGE WORKERS	75%

Competence outweighs personality

Competence and accountability are the strongest drivers of trust, not personality or platform. Two-thirds of general population respondents say that protecting customer privacy or data (66%) and admitting a mistake and outlining steps to fix it (66%) strongly influence whether they trust a company.

Knowledge workers show even stronger preferences for these trust qualities: Three-quarters cite both data protection (75%) and accountability for mistakes (75%) as major drivers of trust.

Listening and responding also improve trust

Listening to feedback and responding to concerns influences trust for 61% of general population respondents and 75% of the knowledge worker subset. Communicating a confident vision for the future matters to 55% and 68%, respectively. These findings suggest that people want leaders who demonstrate command of challenging situations – not just empathy, but understanding what went wrong and knowing what to do next.

Visibility alone does little to build trust

Only 24% of general population respondents say that a CEO who is frequently in the news, on podcasts, or on social media increases their trust, making visibility the weakest trust attribute we tested. Even among knowledge workers, who are much more engaged with media and executive communications, visibility ranks last: just 44% say it meaningfully increases trust.
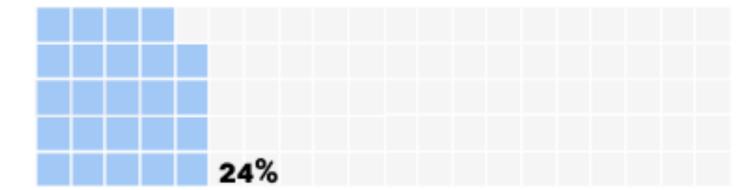
Visibility still matters, but only when it's earned. This isn't a case for less communication – it's a case for more surgical execution. Our research shows that trust isn't built by showing up everywhere; it's built by backing words with action, clarity, and credible expertise.

Trust follows action, not amplification. The most effective leaders are intentional about when they speak, where they show up, and when they elevate those closest to the work.
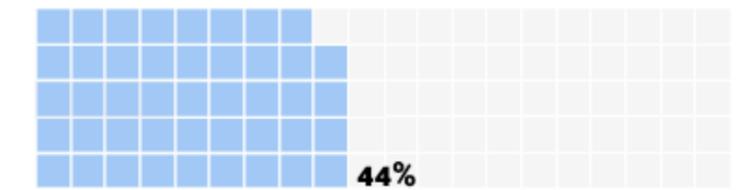
During periods of significant change and/or uncertainty, how much does following increase your trust in a company?

CEO IS FREQUENTLY IN THE NEWS, PODCASTS, YOUTUBE, TIKTOK, OR SOCIAL MEDIA INCREASES TRUST

GEN POP

24%

KNOWLEDGE WORKERS

44%

Knowledge workers prize expertise and decision quality

There are meaningful differences among audiences in this area. Knowledge workers place greater weight on process and expertise: They value consulting outside experts (63% of knowledge workers vs. 50% of general population respondents); making views on policy and legislative priorities clear (60% of knowledge workers vs. 44% of general population); and the reputation of senior leadership (66% of knowledge workers vs. 49% of general population). This suggests that knowledge workers pay more attention to how decisions are made and justified, particularly in complex or technical domains.

"More communication isn't automatically better communication.

Executive visibility has to be measured by **influence, credibility, and impact** – not noise or impressions.

Leaders who build trust are intentional about where they show up and what they say when they do. They pair visibility with action, clarity, and real substance. That's what turns communication into trust."

Tyler Perry | Co-CEO
Mission North

For operational or technical news, **trust is reinforced** when companies elevate leaders who are closest to the facts, the work, and the solution.

# The right speaker, in the right place, at the right time

Trust is earned when organizations (and their communicators) exercise discretion about who speaks for the organization, when they speak, and where.

As this year's survey shows, audiences expect CEOs to be out front when their organizations' reputations are at stake. When it comes to speaking about values and responsibility, people want the CEO. When it comes to explanation and execution, they want expertise.

There are moments where symbolic leadership makes a difference – when people want to hear directly from the person ultimately responsible. Not because the CEO has all the answers, but because presence itself signals ownership. On the other hand, for operational or technical news, trust is reinforced when companies elevate leaders who are closest to the facts, the work, and the solution.

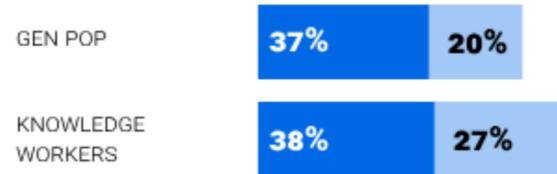## In which situations would you most expect to hear from each type of leader?

LEADERSHIP CHANGE OR STRATEGY
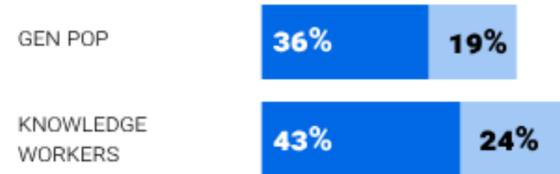
GEN POP — 39% | 19%
KNOWLEDGE WORKERS — 44% | 22%
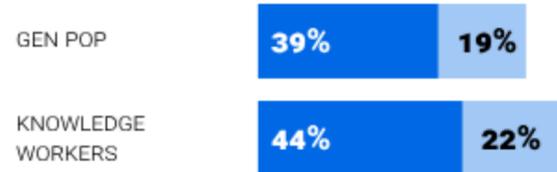
DATA BREACH OR CYBERSECURITY ISSUE

GEN POP — 38% | 18%
KNOWLEDGE WORKERS — 37% | 27%

CORPORATE NEWS (IPO, MERGER, ACQUISITION, LAYOFFS/REORGANIZATION)

GEN POP — 37% | 20%
KNOWLEDGE WORKERS — 38% | 27%

GOVERNMENT ENGAGEMENT (PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP, INVESTIGATION)

GEN POP — 36% | 19%
KNOWLEDGE WORKERS — 43% | 24%

TECHNICAL EXPLANATION OF A PRODUCT, INNOVATION OR R&D BREAKTHROUGH

GEN POP — 22% | 32%
KNOWLEDGE WORKERS — 24% | 38%

SERVICE OUTAGE OR FAILURE

GEN POP — 22% | 28%
KNOWLEDGE WORKERS — 24% | 32%

WORKPLACE CULTURE OR EMPLOYEE ISSUES

GEN POP — 20% | 31%
KNOWLEDGE WORKERS — 25% | 36%
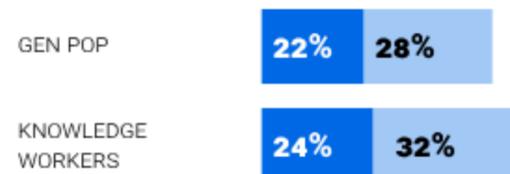
■ CEO   ■ OTHER COMPANY LEADER

## CEO expectations peak during high-stakes moments

Nearly four in 10 of general population respondents (and slightly more knowledge workers) expect the CEO to speak during leadership or strategy changes (39% general population respondents, 44% of knowledge workers), data breaches or cybersecurity issues (38% vs. 37%), corporate news such as IPOs, mergers, or layoffs (37% vs. 38%), and government engagement or investigations (36% vs. 43%).

Other leaders OK for product launches, partnership deals

For a second tier of business activities, shared leadership is the more popular model. About one-third of general population respondents, as well as knowledge workers, say either the CEO or another leader is appropriate for product launches. Coordination and clarity drive trust here, not hierarchy.
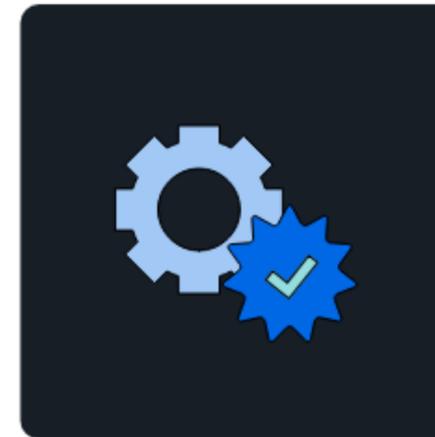
Experts preferred for operational and technical communications

Only about one in five respondents expect the CEO to speak during service outages (22% of general population respondents vs. 24% of knowledge workers), workplace culture or employee issues (20% vs. 25%), or technical explanations of products or R&D breakthroughs (22% vs. 24%). Knowledge workers, in particular, prefer hearing from subject-matter experts in these moments: nearly four in 10 expect another company leader to handle technical explanations (38%), compared to just 24% who expect the CEO.

Trust, credibility earned from explanatory channels

The channels through which leaders share trusted messages also have bearing on trust.

Where leaders show up matters more than how often. Survey respondents draw a sharp distinction between the platforms where they expect company leaders to appear and the platforms where leaders can actually build trust.

The gap between visibility and credibility clearly signals to communicators that simply "being present" is no longer enough; trust is earned only through specific channels that signal substance, accountability, and seriousness of intent.

In fact, while frequent CEO presence is expected in traditional media, it ranks last among trust builders for both audiences.

This is not to say traditional media should be avoided, rather that longer-form, more deliberative platforms, particularly those associated with **explanation rather than promotion**, consistently produce smaller trust gaps and higher trust returns, especially among knowledge workers.

In our view, these channels share a common trait: they allow leaders to demonstrate thinking, not just presence. They reward clarity, expertise, and authenticity. In contrast, high-visibility platforms with compressed formats or overtly performative norms – especially X (formerly Twitter) – generate weaker trust returns relative to their reach, particularly among all respondents.

The value and impact of communications functions

Traditional media excels at awareness. Trust grows when that visibility is reinforced by channels that allow leaders to explain decisions, show accountability, and demonstrate expertise.

As news cycles accelerate and formats compress, the most effective communications strategists today do not choose between earned media and explanatory platforms: They choreograph them, using each medium for what it does best.

EARNED MEDIA
STILL ESSENTIAL FOR:

Legitimacy and third-party validation

Scale and awareness

Agenda-setting moments (IPOs, mergers, crises, policy, category creation)

EXPLANATORY CHANNELS
INCREASINGLY IMPORTANT FOR:

Demonstrating thinking and decision quality

Explaining tradeoffs and "why," not just "what"

Building durable trust with informed and influential audiences

THIS IS NOT PRESS VS. NO PRESS. IT'S SEQUENCING, INTENT, AND DEPTH.

Also at play are structural dynamics that influence media's role in communications strategy:

Shrinking newsrooms

Faster news cycles

Shorter formats

Incentives toward conflict, compression, and novelty

Less room for explanation, more room for reaction

YouTube and podcasts deliver trust

Only 30% of general population respondents expect leaders to appear on YouTube, and only 24% say communication there increases trust. Among knowledge workers, YouTube has more credibility: 47% expect to see leaders on YouTube and 38% say such appearances increase trust. In addition, 30% of knowledge workers expect leaders to make podcast appearances, and 27% say podcast spots increase trust.

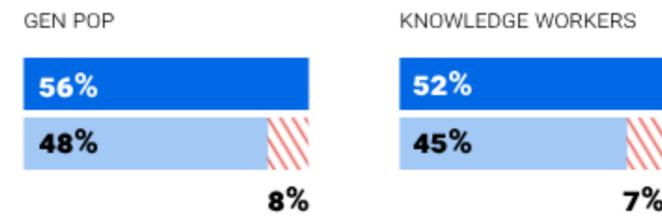## Traditional media placements are expected

Expectations for leadership presence remain anchored in traditional media. A majority of general population respondents expect company leaders to appear on broadcast TV news (56%), company blogs or websites (56%), and online or print news (45%).

However, just because respondents expect leaders to appear in traditional media, those appearances don't necessarily engender trust. For example, while 55% of knowledge workers expect leaders to communicate via company-owned platforms and 52% via broadcast news, fewer say those channels increase trust (43% and 45%, respectively). For this audience, routine visibility through predictable corporate or mass-media channels is necessary for awareness and validation, but insufficient on its own for serious trust-building.
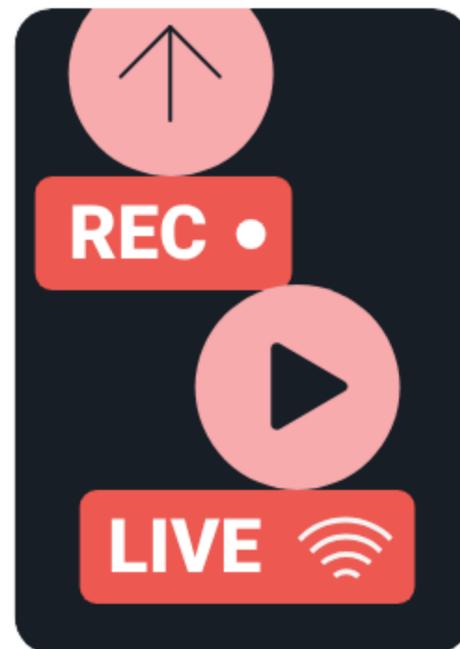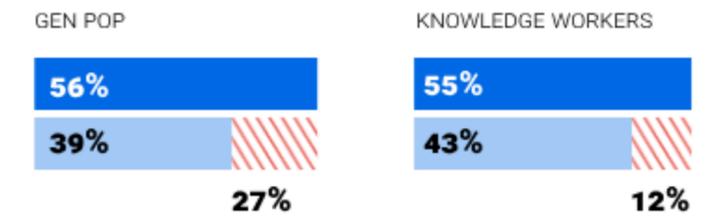
On which platforms do you expect company leaders to appear and communicate?
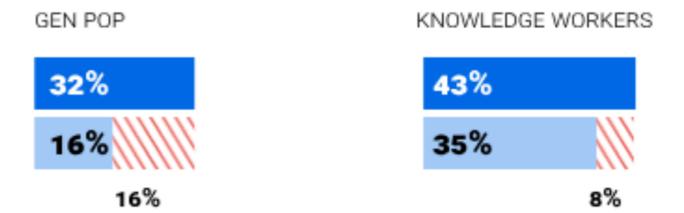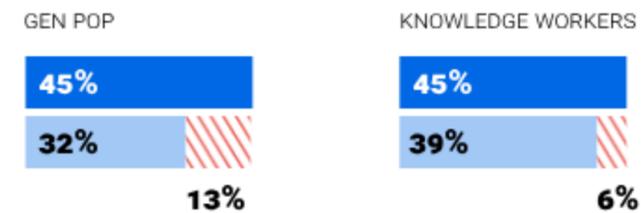
BROADCAST TV NEWS

GEN POP	KNOWLEDGE WORKERS
56%	52%
48%	45%
8%	7%

COMPANY BLOG OR WEBSITE

GEN POP	KNOWLEDGE WORKERS
56%	55%
39%	43%
27%	12%

NEWSLETTERS

GEN POP	KNOWLEDGE WORKERS
38%	36%
26%	29%
12%	7%

X (FORMERLY TWITTER)

GEN POP	KNOWLEDGE WORKERS
32%	43%
16%	35%
16%	8%

ONLINE OR PRINT NEWS

GEN POP	KNOWLEDGE WORKERS
45%	45%
32%	39%
13%	6%

YOUTUBE

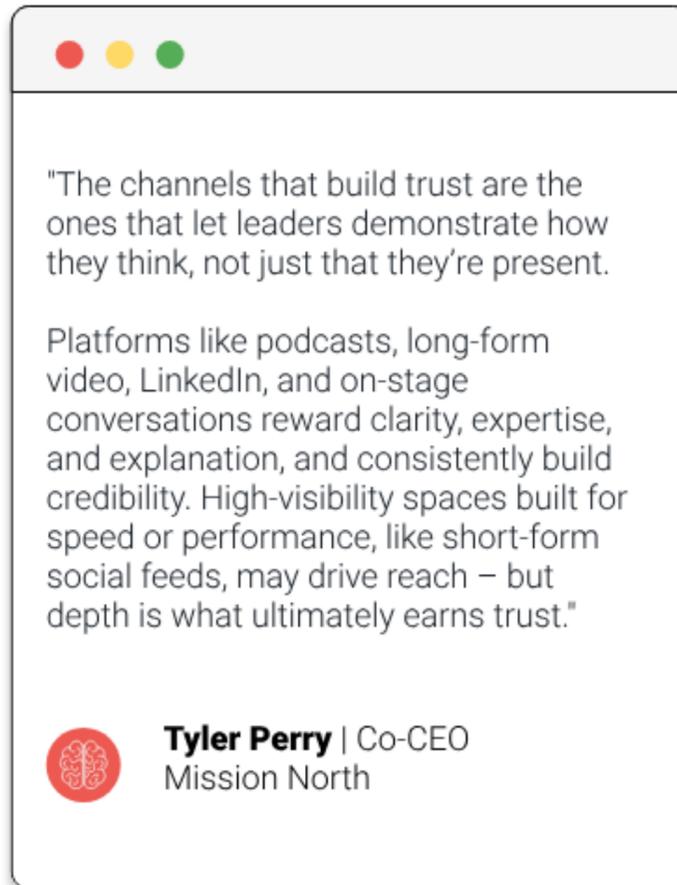| GEN POP	KNOWLEDGE WORKERS
30%	47%
24%	38%
6%	9%
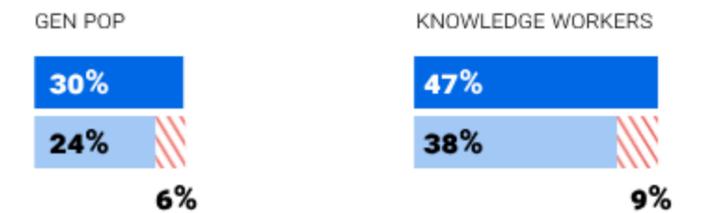
■ EXPECT ■ TRUST ⁄⁄ TRUST GAP

Silence as strategy

When companies face a crisis, people don't expect perfection in communications.

But they expect leaders to avoid preventable mistakes and unforced errors. If that means delaying communications until the facts are known, that's OK, according to all respondents as well as the knowledge worker subset.
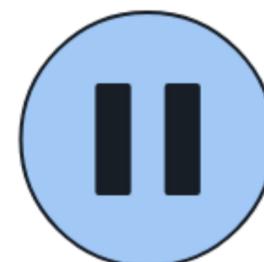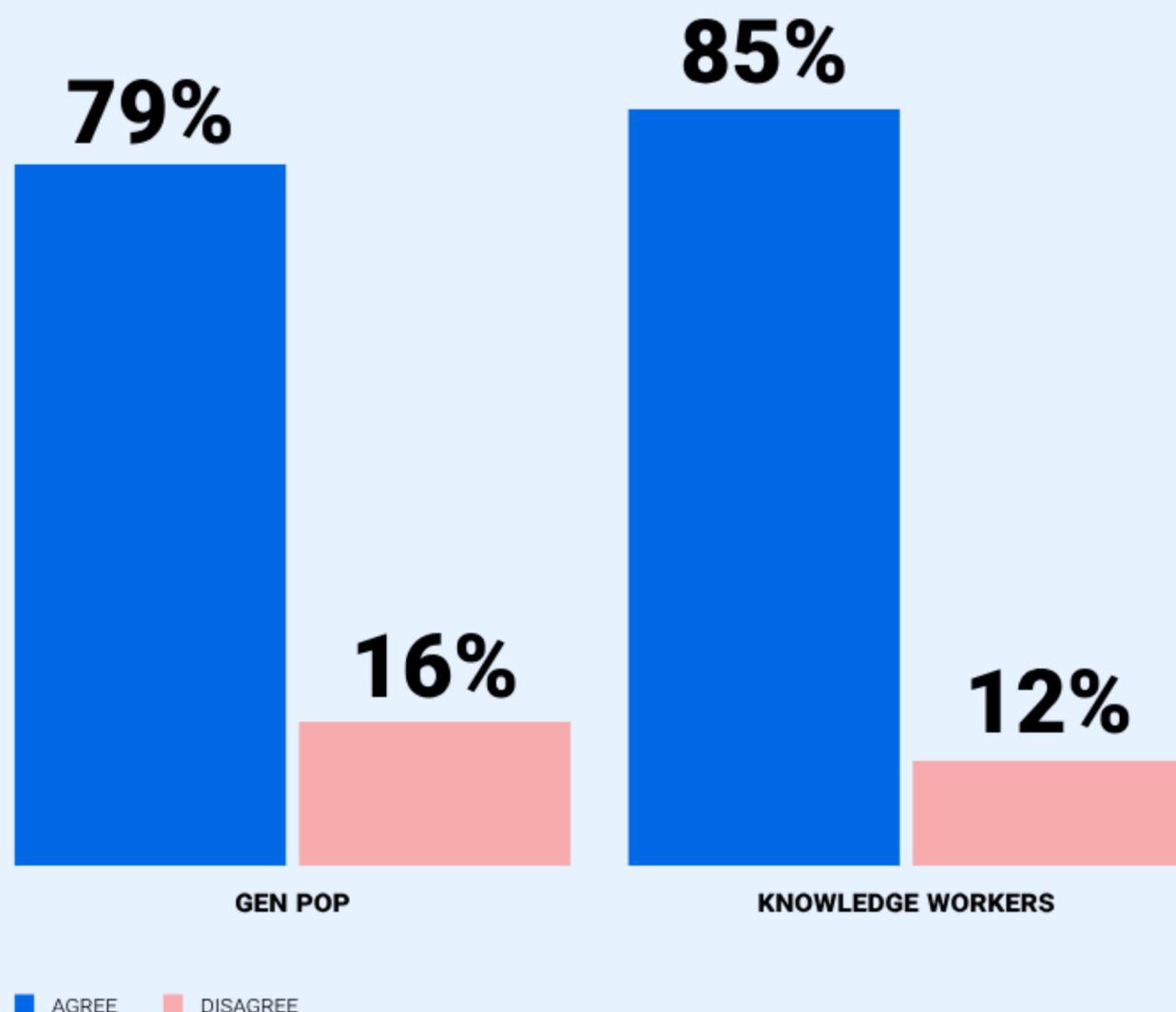
Both the general population and knowledge workers surveyed consistently favor restraint, accuracy, and responsibility over speed, speculation, or deflection. When asked to choose between saying the wrong thing and saying nothing at all, a majority of respondents land decisively on silence.

"The channels that build trust are the ones that let leaders demonstrate how they think, not just that they're present.

Platforms like podcasts, long-form video, LinkedIn, and on-stage conversations reward clarity, expertise, and explanation, and consistently build credibility. High-visibility spaces built for speed or performance, like short-form social feeds, may drive reach – but depth is what ultimately earns trust."

Tyler Perry | Co-CEO
Mission North

The result of these data points is a clear hierarchy of crisis-response norms that communicators can, and should, use as a decision framework:

1. **Avoid unforced errors:** Saying nothing of substance is better than saying something factually incorrect.

2. **Protect accuracy above all:** Do not speculate or release unverified information.

3. **Demonstrate learning and prevention:** Show how the issue will not happen again.

4. **Own responsibility:** Accept blame rather than deflect, even when fault is shared.

5. **Then worry about speed and legal optics:** These are secondary considerations.

Silence from leadership during a crisis makes me question a company's values.

GEN POP
- 79% AGREE
- 16% DISAGREE

KNOWLEDGE WORKERS
- 85% AGREE
- 12% DISAGREE

■ AGREE   ■ DISAGREE

Say nothing

Among general population respondents, 57% say it's better for a company to say nothing at all, compared to just 29% who would prefer leaders to risk saying the wrong thing – a +28-point margin. Knowledge workers are even more emphatic: 67% favor silence for leaders, while only 22% prefer that leaders speak and risk errors. This underscores the importance of accuracy from companies.
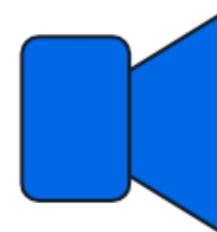
Owning it

Even when a crisis is not entirely an organization's fault, communications missteps can negatively impact reputation. Only 19% of general population respondents and 16% of knowledge workers believe it's better to blame a partner or vendor for a mistake. Strong majorities – 69% and 75%, respectively – say it's better to accept blame even when the company is not entirely at fault. Deflection is toxic to trust. Audiences expect leaders to absorb responsibility rather than redirect it.

Verify before speaking

Faced with a choice between releasing unverified information and offering no announcement until information is confirmed, survey respondents overwhelmingly prioritize accuracy. Nearly seven in 10 of general population respondents (69%) say it's better to wait until facts are confirmed, versus just 20% who favor releasing unverified information – a +49-point gap. Among knowledge workers, there is even greater consensus: 77% favor waiting, compared to only 13% who would rather release information quickly (+64).

Can gender engender trust?

To understand how people respond not just to what leaders say in a crisis, but who says it, the survey asked separate respondent groups to read the same crisis statement attributed either to "John Reed, CEO" or "Jessica Reed, CEO." Respondents then evaluated the message across qualities such as trustworthiness and empathy. The content never changed; only the speaker's perceived gender.

The results point to nuance rather than a simple bias narrative. Among general population respondents, "John" shows a modest edge on attributes associated with authority and reassurance. But when respondents evaluate trustworthiness and effectiveness – the qualities most closely tied to credibility – those differences largely disappear. Among knowledge workers, the gap shrinks further. Taken together, the data suggest that while symbolic leadership cues may shape initial impressions, audiences ultimately anchor trust in message substance and accountability.

One of the more surprising findings is that emotional tone is not strongly associated with the female speaker. In fact, respondents slightly favored the male speaker on emotional attributes. Rather than signaling a reversal of stereotypes, this likely reflects a broader shift: audiences increasingly expect crisis leaders, regardless of gender, to demonstrate empathy and accountability. Emotional expression is becoming normalized as a leadership trait, not gendered behavior.

What do these nuances mean for communicators? It comes down to goals. If the objective is to build trust, reassurance, and credibility – especially with elite, informed, or internal audiences – gender is not a liability. The traits audiences value most in crisis – trustworthiness, effectiveness, and reassurance – are either not gendered or can even lean female. But if you overplay the "authoritative presence" card, you can risk missing what actually drives trust, particularly among knowledge workers.
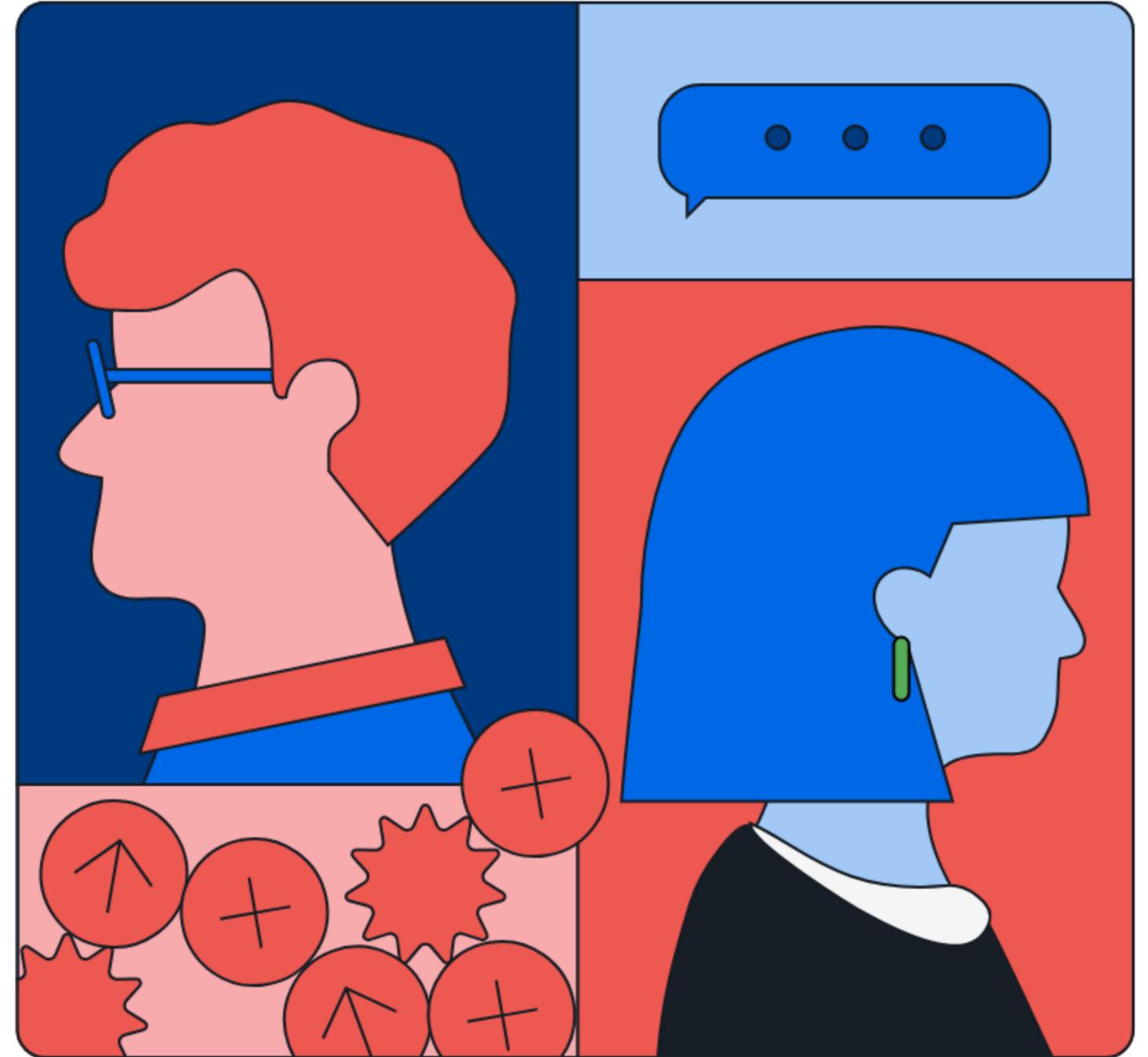
Subtle authority perceptions exist, but credibility converges

Critically, those perception differences do not translate into meaningful differences in trustworthiness (+1) or effectiveness (+2). This indicates that while symbolic authority cues may influence first impressions, audiences ultimately judge crisis leadership on competence and message quality.

Knowledge workers evaluate performance over symbolism

When rating the male and female speakers as trustworthy, empathetic, or effective, respondents found that "John" and "Jessica" were similar. Any slight differences in respondents' preferences fell within the survey's margin of error. The absence of a meaningful gap suggests that audiences focused more on the substance of the message than on the identity of the speaker — consistent with broader findings that trust is driven by clarity, accountability, and execution rather than symbolic cues.

Substance overrides stereotype

Contrary to common assumptions, emotional tone is not read as inherently gendered. In fact, respondents slightly favored the male speaker on emotional attributes (+5, and +3, respectively). Rather than signaling stereotype reversal, this suggests that empathy and emotional clarity are increasingly viewed as baseline leadership behaviors in crisis contexts.
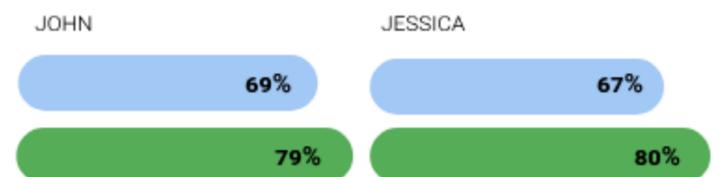
AUTHENTIC

JOHN	JESSICA
65%	61%
77%	76%

TRUSTWORTHY

JOHN	JESSICA
64%	63%
75%	75%

EMOTIONAL

JOHN	JESSICA
51%	46%
58%	55%

EFFECTIVE

JOHN	JESSICA
69%	67%
79%	80%

■ GEN POP ■ KNOWLEDGE WORKERS

Trust is not monolithic

While broad trust patterns hold across audiences, subgroup analysis does reveal variation in what builds credibility.

These differences reinforce a central finding of this year's Index: trust strategies must be tuned to the intended audience. Visibility, tone, and technology choices are interpreted through generational and experiential lenses.

Generational differences are pronounced

Younger audiences expect leaders to show up on the platforms they use, particularly YouTube and short-form video:

- 47% of Gen Z and 42% of Millennials expect to see leaders on YouTube, compared to lower expectations from Gen X (in the 20s) and Boomers (single digits)

- **Trust follows visibility:** Gen Z and Millennials are more trusting if companies appear on YouTube (38% Gen Z vs. 37% Millennials), TikTok or Reels (35% vs. 21%), and X (27% vs. 28%), with older generations showing trust lift largely in the single digits.
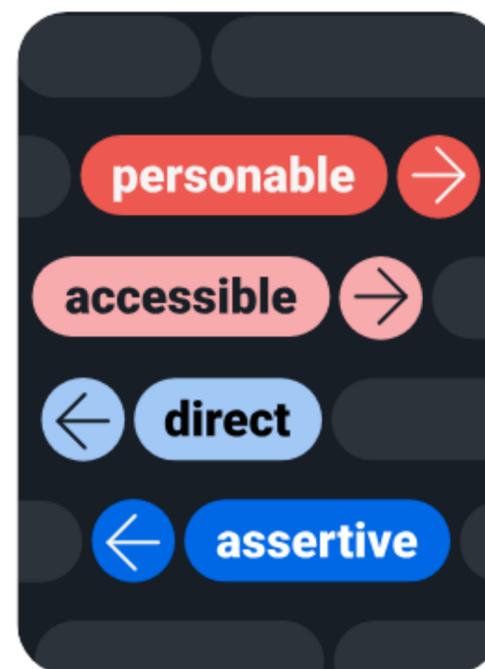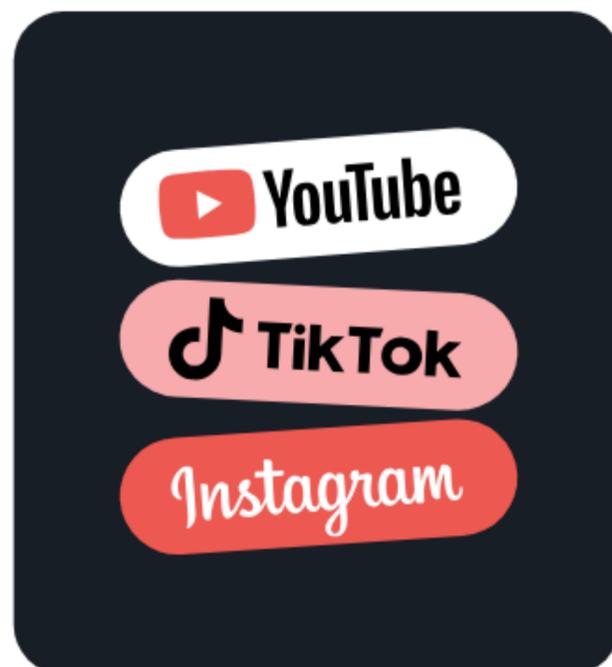
Preferred communication emphasis varies

Within the general population, Women, Democrats, and Gen Z tend to gravitate more toward "personable and accessible" than "direct, assertive" when it comes to executive communication style:

- **Women** show 42% increase in trust for "personable" vs. 35% for "direct" (+7)
- **Gen Z**: 49% increase in trust vs. 42% (+7)
- **Democrats**: 46% increase in trust vs. 37% (+9)

Men respond more strongly to forward-looking, aspirational vision (+6 compared to women), while women place greater weight on visible listening and responsiveness (+7 compared to men).

AI attitudes diverge

Millennials are the most supportive of AI integration across business functions, while Boomers are the most resistant. Gen Z shows elevated skepticism toward AI initiatives, likely reflecting concerns about advancement and upward mobility.

For example, 60% of Millennials are comfortable with AI-generated executive avatars giving public statements. 44% of Gen Z are comfortable; 35% of Gen X; and only 20% of Boomers.

Attitudes on AI product recommendations or personalization

61%   32%   71%   25%   56%   36%   42%   48%
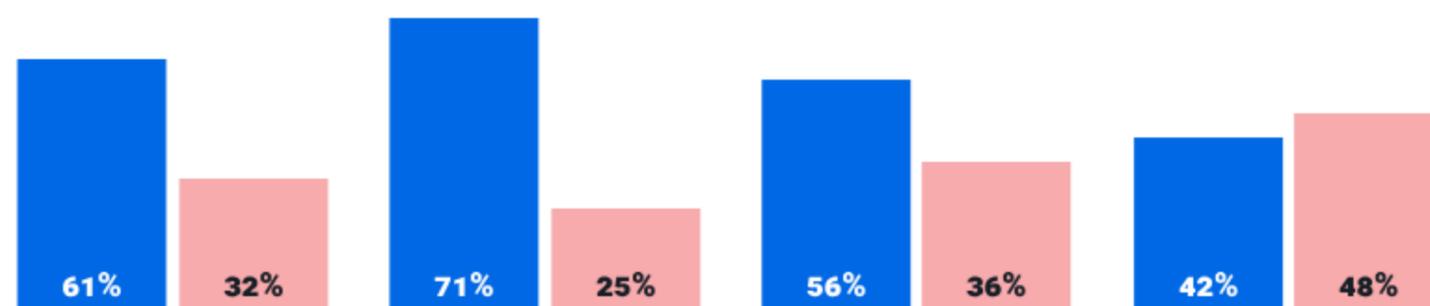
■ COMFORTABLE   ■ UNCOMFORTABLE

Restraint, responsibility, and clarity

Today's brands build trust through intentional presence, not maximum visibility. Earned media still matters for awareness and validation, but trust compounds in channels that allow leaders to explain decisions, demonstrate accountability, and show their work. A modern communications program should lean on both to deliver the highest impact.

In an era of AI-driven scrutiny and accelerated crises, credibility is built by restraint, accountability, and clarity. Communications should be evaluated based not on volume, but influence.

10 Trust-Building Best Practices

VERIFY BEFORE SPEAKING.

Accuracy beats speed; silence beats speculation.

OWN THE OUTCOME.

Accept responsibility even when fault is shared. Don't deflect.

DEPLOY THE RIGHT VOICE.

CEO for high-stakes moments; experts for explanation and execution.

SHOW YOUR WORK.
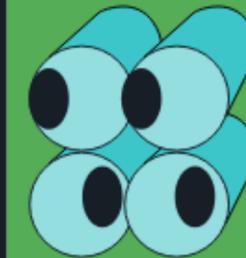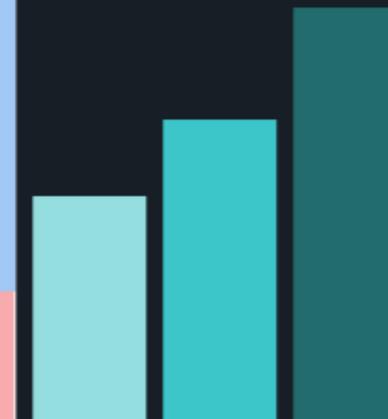
Explain decisions, tradeoffs, and what changes next.

CHOREOGRAPH CHANNELS.

Earned for validation and awareness; explanatory platforms (podcasts, YouTube, LinkedIn) for durable credibility.

PROTECT PEOPLE AND DATA.

Privacy and admitting mistakes are top trust drivers.

BUILD A RESILIENT BENCH.

Elevate people closest to the facts to scale trust beyond the CEO.

LEAD WITH VALUES THAT IMPACT STAKEHOLDERS.

Employees, the environment, and social responsibility are trust multipliers in times of uncertainty.

ADOPT AI WITH HUMAN ACCOUNTABILITY.

Use AI to support decision-makers, not to replace them – and disclose its use.

INVEST EARLY.

Trust is earned through consistent behavior long before a crisis

Mission North