



NAVIGATING THROUGH TURBULENCE

**REPUTATION RESILIENCE IN
UNCERTAIN TIMES.**

Lessons from the Ipsos Archives



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Managing Director, Corporate
Reputation – Ipsos in the UK

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PREFACE.

“The world is in a severe recession, but this does not lessen the importance of reputation. Strong reputations will help companies through this crisis.”

Not a glimpse into the near future, but a lesson from history. This was the opening line of the first Ipsos Reputation Council report, launched amid the Great Recession, in 2009.

Since then, we’ve listened to the concerns and experiences of communications leaders through the slow economic recovery, the COVID-19 pandemic, and all the turbulence in between. These custodians of reputation possess invaluable insights and experience, crucial for companies facing today’s challenges.

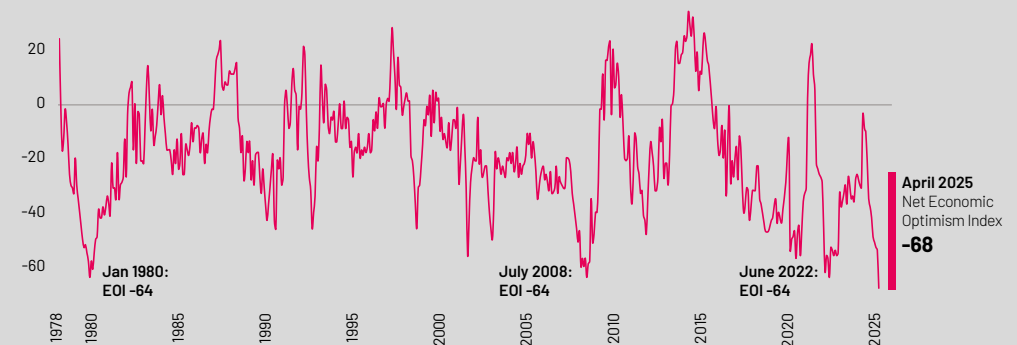
The possibility of a global economic slump looms. The “R-word” is increasingly

mentioned in earnings calls and tariffs are frequently cited by business leaders as a likely headwind to growth. Negativity pervades the business and investor worlds, both shaping and reflecting consumer confidence.

Economic confidence in some countries (particularly here in the UK) is at an all-time low¹, and Britons anticipate tariffs having a negative impact on both the UK and global economies². Based on our latest political data, this erosion of faith in economic stewardship is changing the political landscape and we’re seeing signs of yet more turbulence on the horizon from a continued rise of populist politics.

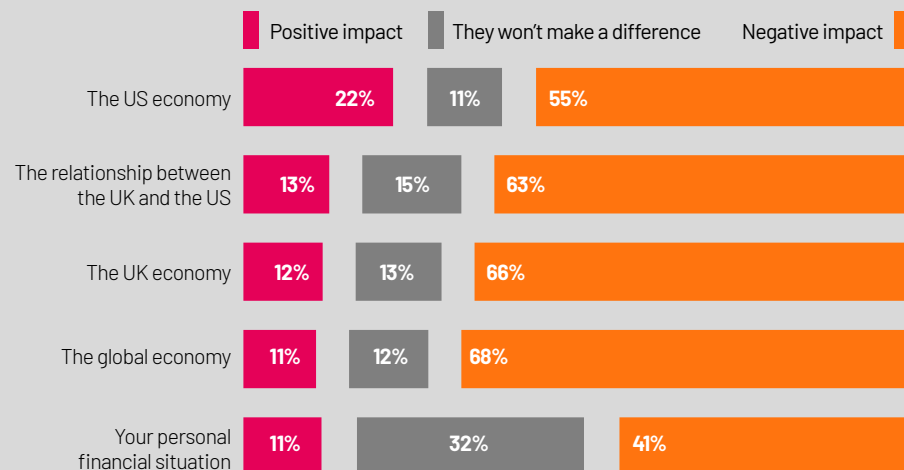
IPSOS ECONOMIC OPTIMISM INDEX (1978-2025)

Do you think that the general economic condition of the country will improve, stay the same or get worse over the next 12 months? *Net Economic Optimism Index = % get better minus % get worse*



Base: c.1,000 British adults 18+ each month

Do you think tariffs will have a positive or negative impact on each of the following, or will they not make any difference?



Base: c.1,080 British adults 18-75, 4-7 April 2025

Economic slumps present unique challenges, impacting not only an organisation's bottom line but also its reputation and stakeholder relationships, particularly as new stakeholders emerge. Effective communication becomes paramount in uncertain times, for maintaining trust, managing expectations, and guiding stakeholders through tempestuous waters.

The need for resilience is paramount. We are unapologetically data-led, so we have trawled the Ipsos archives and delved into research from previous recessions, along with eighteen waves of Reputation Council fieldwork – including commentary from Council Members facing down this latest economic shockwave. Our deep dive has identified consistent themes that emerge during economic downturns: increased public stress, financial anxieties, pessimism,

and declining trust in institutions, but also valuable Ipsos research designed to help organisations survive recessions gone by and first-hand advice from communications leaders who lived through it all.

This edition of Ipsos' **'Navigating Through Turbulence'** series leverages our extensive research and expertise to provide a practical framework for surviving this polycrisis. Our goal is to provide actionable insights and lessons, enabling organisations to emerge from this challenging economic period with their reputations intact. I hope you find it useful.

Tom Fife-Schaw
Managing Director,
Corporate Reputation
Ipsos in the UK



INTRODUCTION: CONTEXT IS KEY.

We live in turbulent times. That much is clear, but it was true even before the recent trade war escalations. In our last two Reputation Council sittings, Geopolitics has emerged as the most common issue that keeps Chief Communications Officers (CCOs) up at night.

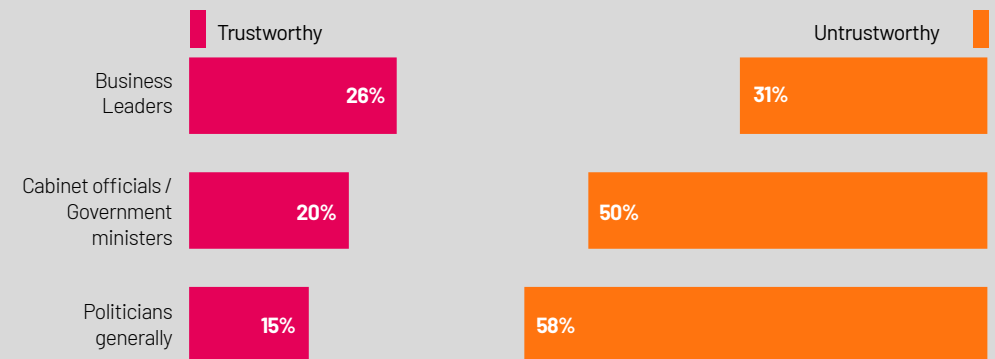
When asked about the biggest issues facing her organisation this year, one Council Member told us: **"If it's my top three, it's geopolitics, geopolitics, geopolitics."**³ The prevailing sentiment remains one of uncertainty.

Long before the US announced tariffs, many countries had been experiencing rising inflation, stagnant economic growth and increasing political polarisation. Whether caused by market volatility, political instability, consumer anxiety, disruption to supply chains, or the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, economic confidence was already low and a broader global trend of pessimism existed.

The Ipsos Happiness Index shows a clear downward trend over time in happiness levels since 2011. Of the 20 countries in that first survey, 15 are less happy than they were then⁴, highlighting the profound impact of economic and societal challenges on individual well-being. With a new downturn looming, this decline in happiness could accelerate, posing significant challenges for organisations seeking to connect with increasingly disillusioned consumers.

Adding to this complexity is a pre-existing crisis of trust. The Ipsos Global Trustworthiness Index consistently ranks politicians last among trusted professions, reflecting a deep-seated scepticism towards political leadership. And business leaders, while faring slightly better, are more likely to be distrusted than trusted.

Whether or not we officially fall into recession these uncertain foundations risk becoming further destabilised by economic uncertainty, making the importance of a good reputation more vital than ever.



Base: 23,530 online adults under the age of 75 across 32 countries, interviewed 24 May-7 June 2024)

Source: Ipsos Global Trustworthiness Index 2024

1. TRUST: YOUR RECESSION- PROOF SHIELD.

A strong reputation is an asset that pays dividends in the present and in future, particularly when the future appears turbulent.

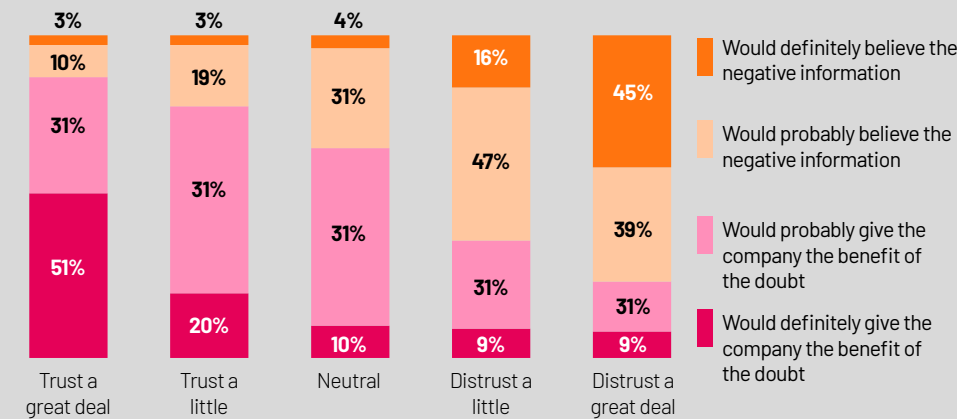
In the present, a strong reputation helps the company improve business performance, and for the future it acts as a reserve of goodwill during crises.

In general, people are willing to give a company the benefit of the doubt in a crisis, but just as individuals give trusted people the benefit of the doubt, stakeholders do the same for reputable companies. The Ipsos Global Reputation Monitor⁵ found that 21% would 'definitely', and 49% would 'probably' give a company the benefit of the doubt. But factor trust into the equation

and you start to see why the stated aim of so many blue-chip organisations is to be the 'most trusted' in their field. When it comes to people who trust a company a great deal, half (51%) would 'definitely' give that company the benefit of the doubt in a crisis, a figure that shrinks to 10% among people who feel neutral towards a company.

The benefits of a strong reputation are tangible. Essentially, reputation is the grease on the wheels of industry. A strong reputation fosters more productive relationships with all stakeholders; regulators are less likely to intervene, partners offer better terms, media are more receptive to your perspective, and consumers are more likely to trust and respond positively to your messaging.

Benefit of the doubt and trust



Base: Online survey of over 20,000 adults aged 16-74.

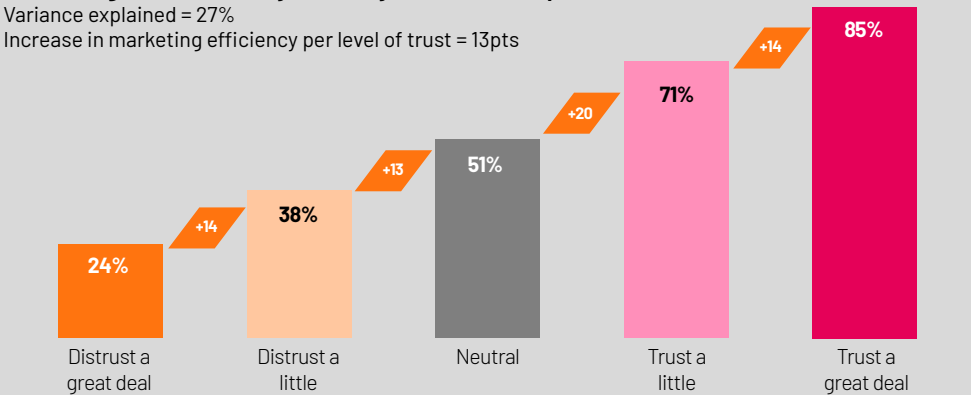
Source: Ipsos: Unlocking the Value of Reputation, September 2023

Our Global Reputation Monitor⁶ shows direct increases in marketing efficiency with incremental levels of trust. Every increase in a company's trust level corresponds to a roughly 13-point gain in their marketing efficiency index score, with the most significant improvement occurring when trust shifts from neutral to positive.

Not only is advertising spend more likely to convert into a sale (higher marketing efficiency) when the company is trusted, consumers are also more willing to pay a premium for a trusted brand.

Marketing and efficiency index by trust All companies

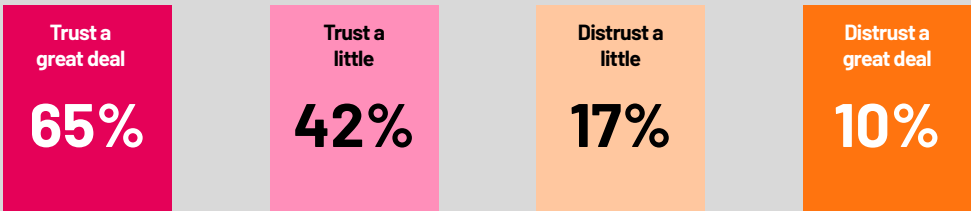
Variance explained = 27%
Increase in marketing efficiency per level of trust = 13pts



Base: Online survey of over 20,000 adults aged 16-74.

Source: Ipsos: Unlocking the Value of Reputation, September 2023

Would pay a premium



Base: Online survey of over 20,000 adults aged 16-74

Source: Ipsos: Unlocking the Value of Reputation, September 2023

Trust is especially important in crises when companies need a receptive audience. Historically, a sound reputation has been the lighthouse for businesses in the proverbial storm. In 2009, a large majority (88%) of Reputation Council Members agreed that the reputation of a company would become even more important in the recession.⁷

Building trust is the cornerstone of developing reputation and when surveyed later the same year, Council

Members felt that the economic upheaval at the time had served to further increase the importance of trust.⁸

In times of uncertainty, people crave authentic messages from trusted sources. Businesses will now need to rely heavily on their reputational value to ride out the impending storm.

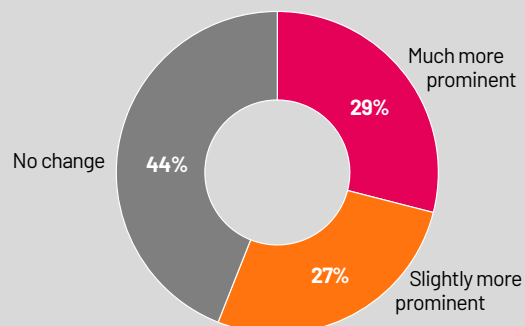
How much do you agree or disagree that during the current economic downturn



Base: Reputation Council Members, March 2009, (40)

Source: Reputation Council - First Sitting

Has trust as an issue become more or less prominent or has there been no change?



Base: Reputation Council Members, Autumn 2009, (41)

Source: Reputation Council - Second Sitting

88%
of Reputation Council Members
in 2009 felt the Great Recession
would make a company's
reputation even more important



2. CONNECT TO THRIVE: TARGETED COMMUNICATION IN A DOWNTURN.

During a crisis, companies are wide open to the threat of reputational damage. Stakeholders become more critical of corporate behaviour and communications. They scrutinise actions and messaging more closely, looking for inconsistencies, insincerity, or anything which appears to be 'tone deaf'.

Effective communication starts with knowing who you're talking to and what they need to hear. During challenging economic times, this understanding becomes even more critical, as audience needs and priorities shift in response to financial pressures.

Start by identifying your key stakeholder groups. These typically include:

- Your internal audience, employees, whose morale and loyalty are essential for weathering the storm
- Your consumers, whose loyalty becomes harder to maintain and new customers harder to attract during a downturn
- Investors, who seek reassurance and transparency regarding your organisation's financial performance and strategy
- The media, powerful influencers of public perception who need accurate and timely information
- And the wider public and the communities you operate within, whose positive perception contributes to long-term sustainability.

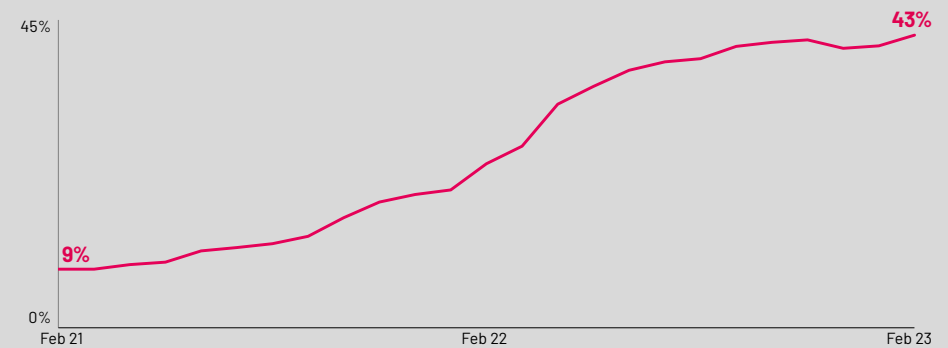
Once these key audiences are identified, leverage research and data to understand their recession-driven concerns and anxieties. Surveys can gather quantitative data on perceptions and behaviours, while qualitative methods like focus groups and interviews offer richer insights into stakeholder motivations. Data analytics, applied to website traffic and customer data, can reveal behavioural trends and patterns. The insights gleaned from this research should then shape your communication strategy, tailoring messages to resonate with each audience's specific needs.

In an economic downturn, attention can swiftly turn to finances. The number of people identifying inflation as one of the main issues facing their country increased almost five-fold (from 9% to 43%) between February 2021⁹ and February 2023¹⁰.

In the face of similar concerns in 2025, a tailored strategy might prioritise messaging around value and affordability for consumers, job security and support for employees, financial performance and stability to reassure investors, and local support and social responsibility to demonstrate ongoing commitment to communities.

This audience-centric, data-driven approach strengthens stakeholder relationships, builds trust, and protects your organisation's reputation during a recession, proving essential for effective communication and navigating economic challenges.

Inflation is one of the three most worrying topics in my country – Global country average



Base: Online survey of over 25,000 adults aged 16-74.

Source: Ipsos What Worries the World

378%
increase in people identifying
inflation as a main issue
facing their country between
Feb'21 to Feb '23

3. ACTIVATE YOUR ADVOCATES: EMPOWERING EMPLOYEES FOR RESILIENCE.

In today’s ever-changing landscape, organisations must adapt to unforeseen challenges and uncertainties. Engaging and informing employees effectively is paramount.

Truly engaged employees transform into internal ambassadors, safeguarding the organisation’s reputation and ensuring a consistent and trustworthy presence across all stakeholder interactions.¹¹

Trust extends far beyond being just a buzzword; it is the key to unlocking high performance. High levels of trust within teams enhance collaboration and lead to more informed decision-making. When trust is deeply embedded, employees feel

empowered to share ideas and collaborate openly. This environment of trust fosters a culture of psychological safety, where employees feel comfortable taking calculated risks. Such an atmosphere encourages innovation and continuous improvement.¹²

Research shows that trust tends to diminish higher up the leadership hierarchy. To combat this, transparent communication is crucial, particularly for CEOs, to inspire trust and confidence in the organisation’s direction. Transparency should be complemented by empathy, ensuring employees feel that their leaders genuinely understand their challenges. Things can still get better – nearly half of internal communications professionals see a need for improvement in leaders’

communication effectiveness.¹³ Anticipating global shifts in stability, trust in leadership will become even more indispensable.

In a turbulent 2025, societal issues are at the forefront of public consciousness. While about half of employees feel their organisation addresses major issues like climate change, conflicts, and inequality, 62% expect such action. This gap highlights a shortfall in meeting employee expectations. Deficiency in this area can negatively impact trust, engagement and advocacy, emphasising the need for organisations to align actions with employee expectations to remain relevant and trusted in these challenging times.¹⁴

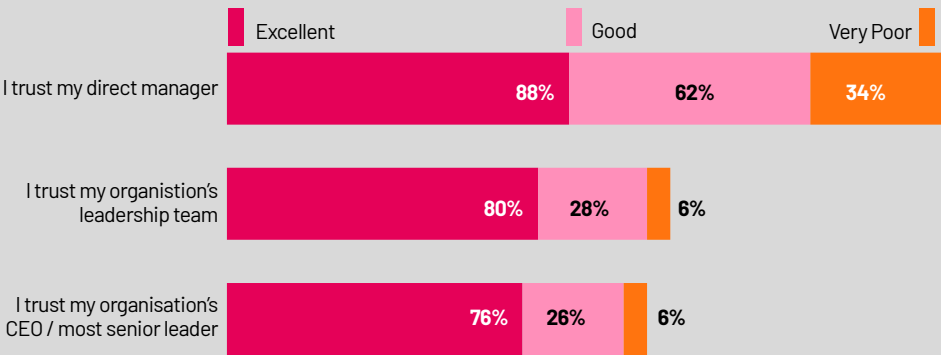
Trust is dynamic and can shift. Implementing

measurement strategies (including surveys, interviews, and indirect indicators such as retention and team performance) provides valuable insights into employee sentiment. Confronting and responding to results can better inform efficacy and meaningful change. Regularly monitoring sentiment acts as an early warning mechanism, enabling swift responses to changes driven by internal or external factors.¹⁵

Trust is no mere luxury; it is essential for success. Organisations that commit to nurturing trust through thoughtful measurement and responsive action will reap benefits in performance, engagement, innovation, and resilience, ultimately fostering a thriving workplace even amidst uncertainty.

Excellent internal communication leads to higher trust

*Scores do not add up to 100% because of rounding.

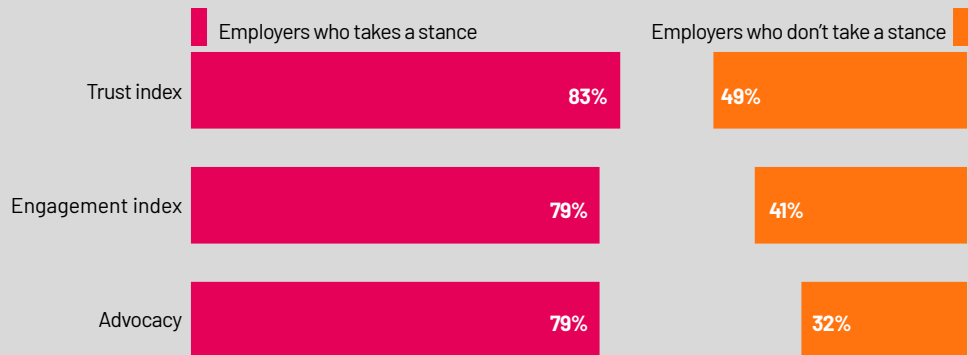


Base: A representative quota sample of 4,000 UK workers aged 18–64 in the UK were surveyed between 6–20 March 2024.

Source: Ipsos Karian and Box IC Index 2024

Employees are nearly twice as likely to trust, engage with, or advocate for employers who take a clear stance on important issues

Percentages have been rebased to exclude “I don’t know” responses



Base: A representative quota sample of 4,000 UK workers aged 18–64 in the UK were surveyed between 6–20 March 2024.

Source: Ipsos Karian and Box IC Index 2024

4. COMMUNICATE WITH IMPACT: TRANSPARENCY AND EMPATHY.

Past economic downturns provide a helpful playbook for how to communicate in a crisis. The Great Recession increased consumer and stakeholder demands for transparency, while the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of empathy.

Transparency serves as the foundational element of trust in business relationships – and its importance will only grow in a period of uncertainty provoked by an economic crisis. Looking back to 2009,¹⁶ transparency dominated the thoughts

of Reputation Council Members looking to help their organisations bounce back from the global economic downturn.

In an era of information overload and rising consumer scepticism, Ipsos Global Trustworthiness data underscores transparency as a fundamental driver of trust across sectors, revealing an ever-growing expectation for organisations to embrace openness and accountability.¹⁷

Organisations can't just talk the talk. This means going beyond simple compliance or perfunctory disclosures and embracing

an authentic commitment to openness. By doing so, they can better navigate crises, reduce reputational risks, and build a robust trust foundation.

Transparency can help define the narrative around an organisation, but only if communications are proactive. Controlling and shaping the narrative are essential for building resilient reputations, allowing organisations to engage stakeholders effectively, and manage risks before they escalate.

Ten years ago, we asked Reputation

Council Members how much time they spent (and how much time they would ideally spend) on proactive reputation management. Members estimated they spent 65% of their time on proactive reputation-building efforts, but aspired to increase this to 77%, underscoring a strong desire among communicators to prioritise proactive strategies.¹⁸

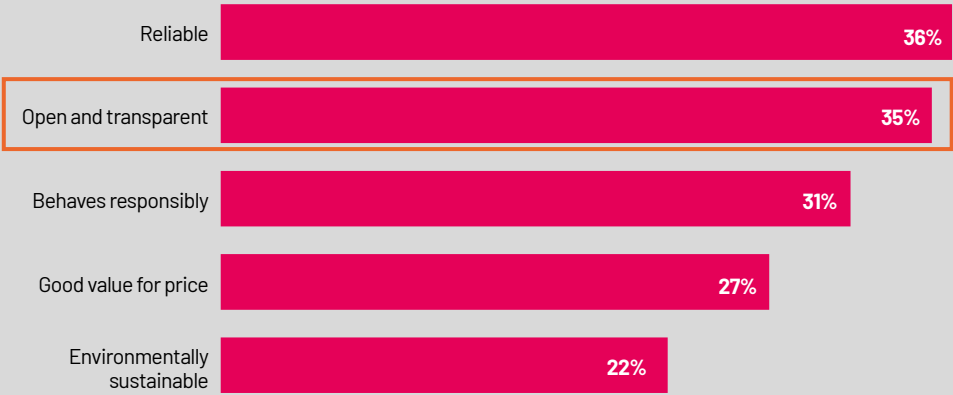
Issues relating to reputation (Autumn 2009)



Base: Reputation Council Members, Autumn 2009(41)

Source: Ipsos Reputation Council – Second Sitting

Which two or three of the following attributes, if any, are most important to you when deciding whether or not to trust an organisation or institution?



Base: Online survey of over 20,000 adults aged 18-64+ in 24 countries, December 2022.

Source: Ipsos Global Reputation Monitor

Relative importance of purchase drivers



Base: n=1,238 cases

Source: Ipsos, The Empathy Gap and How to Bridge It

In times of crisis, however, organisations can easily be forced into reactive mode. Preparedness is paramount; organisations with established communication protocols and crisis-response plans are better equipped to manage such surges, allowing for efficient triage and reducing response times.

Another crucial component of effective crisis communication is empathy; the ability to understand and share the feelings of others. During the pandemic, businesses that aligned their communication strategies with their overarching goals and crafted key messages in anticipation of crises were able to demonstrate genuine care for stakeholders effectively. Recent insights build on these experiences, highlighting a growing desire for businesses to portray empathy.¹⁹

These insights underscored some crucial takeaways for communicators. 90% of Americans felt that empathy must be substantiated through actions, not just words, while 86% asserted that demonstrating empathy was essential for cultivating lasting customer loyalty.

Displaying empathy isn't just important from a reputation standpoint. Ipsos' brand tracking data shows that 'Empathy and Fitting In' also contributes to market share growth. Advertising that demonstrates 'Creative Experiences and Ideas' in combination with 'Empathy and Fitting In' has a 20% stronger performance than average, with evidence from the Ipsos brand tracking database showing that brands perceived as understanding and supporting their customers consistently drove consumer choice.²⁰





5. RIDE THE WAVE: ADAPTABLE COMMUNICATION IN A DOWNTURN.

In uncertain times, agile communications are key. Organisations must monitor evolving consumer behaviour, market dynamics, and public sentiment to adapt strategies and messaging, effectively addressing shifts in consumption patterns and stakeholder expectations, from value-seeking to demands for authenticity and transparency.

Ipsos research on the Great Recession reveals lasting shifts in shopping habits. Consumers embraced own-brand and lower-cost alternatives, many continuing even after the recession ended. Perhaps due to a tightening of the purse strings, consumers were more inclined to trial new concepts during the Recession than in a period of economic stability (2016–2019), but significantly over-indexed on products which offered value.²¹

Shifts in spending patterns also occur. For example, while US grocery spending increased in 2024 primarily due to inflation, a quarter of consumers also reported cooking more at home as a cheaper alternative to dining out, with 10% even trading up to higher-quality groceries within this increased spend.

Public sentiment influences corporate stances. During the last downturn, public expectation for corporate engagement on social issues²² led CEOs to speak out on topics like Black Lives Matter, the Ukraine war, and the Qatar World Cup. While

Reputation Council Members largely felt obligated to address the Ukraine war (73% disagreed that businesses should stay silent about a crisis of that magnitude)²³ and the Black Lives Matter protests (81% felt that the public expected them to take a stand on D&I issues), fewer (62%) felt comfortable taking a public position on the latter, citing concerns about saying the wrong thing.²⁴

CCOs are key to helping leaders understand when they should (and shouldn't) comment on a wider issue. Most Council Members in our latest wave of research prefer to comment only on topics which specifically relate to their business or align directly with the organisation's values.

One Council Member tells us, "Sometimes it's really uncomfortable not to say anything. But our job in comms is to help the leaders hold their nerve sometimes and just say no, this is fine. It's fine not to say anything... Look at it against the values of the company, look at it from the point of view of 'do we have a right to have an opinion on this topic?'"

Such an approach is likely to be appreciated by members of the public, since our most recent US polling on the subject found that a majority of Americans (57%) now say that companies should remain neutral on social and political issues.²⁶ But events like an economic downturn could swing the pendulum back the other way, and fast, making it all the more important to continually monitor sentiment.

"Our job in comms is to help the leaders hold their nerve sometimes and just say no, this is fine. It's fine not to say anything."

6. SUSTAINABILITY AND STABILITY: AUTHENTIC BRAND BUILDING IN A DOWNTURN.

Maintaining a long-term perspective during a crisis is easier said than done. But short-sighted measures, like drastic cost-cutting or inauthentic purpose initiatives, can damage reputation and hinder long-term growth.

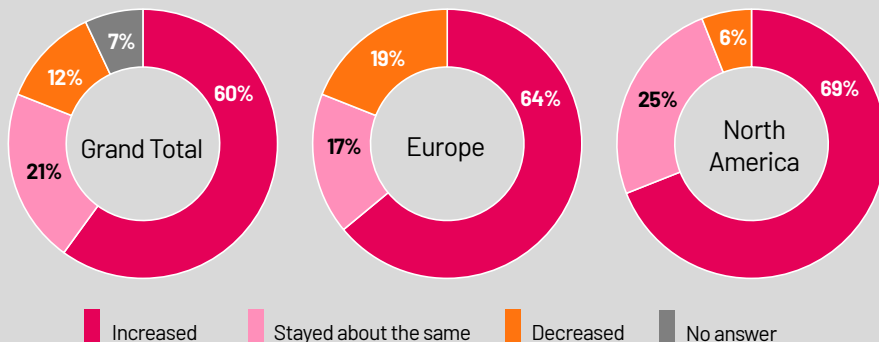
Consistency in brand building and reputation management is key. While short-term tactics like pricing and promotions are tempting during downturns, Ipsos MMA research shows that brand-focused marketing delivers two to three times greater long-term impact.²⁷

This isn't a luxury; it's a necessity for

emerging stronger. And the same goes for reputation management. Interviewed mid-recession in 2009, all Reputation Council Members said that they expected to face increasing budget pressures,²⁸ but by 2013, 60% of Council Members had increased expenditure on reputation management since the global financial crisis.²⁹

As we have heard from 2025 Reputation Council Members, the responsibility often falls to the CCO to try and keep a focus on the long-term goals as well as the short-term imperative. One Council Member talks of the difficulties of horizon scanning during uncertain times.

Would you say there has been an increase or decrease in expenditure on reputation management in your company in the last 5 years, or has it stayed about the same



Base: Grand total (113), Europe (42), North America (16*), interviewed April to July 2013 * small base size.

Source: Reputation Council - Eighth Sitting

60%

of Reputation Council Members increased spend on reputation management in the 5 years after the global financial crash

"We are encountering the most complex and challenging commercial, regulatory, political and social environment we've ever seen. And the challenge for us is to try to get on the front foot as much as possible. To try to be the person at the top of the mast looking at what's on the horizon. Bearing in mind the horizon is so unpredictable. I think it's harder than ever to try to identify what's happening."³⁰

While another speaks of the threat to ESG.

"My push is always to say we have to balance the short-term and the long-term objectives and investments. What has happened over the last few years - because of this economic challenge, the issues which stimulate inflation - has been this short-termism. And that is impacting the kind of comms we do, the sort of projects that we're looking at as a business, and it impacts focus on ESG."³¹

Indeed, ESG initiatives have already suffered. Nearly 40% of Ipsos' ESG

Council members (a global cohort of more than 50 Chief Sustainability Officers (CSO)) reported departmental objections derailing initiatives,³² with resource constraints, supply chain issues, and economic volatility often to blame.

Many organisations revised their commitments due to short-term cost pressures, a necessary reset for long-term viability and impact. But others demonstrated more of a retreat, particularly in the US, amidst "anti-woke" sentiment and policy changes.

In an economic downturn, projects with more distant timeframes can often be de-prioritised. But with only one in six ESG Council Members finding it difficult to tell stories about sustainability that resonate with stakeholders,³³ ESG remains a valid way for companies to address stakeholder concerns proactively and build trust. The CCO and CSO must champion its continued importance.

7. AI AS STAKEHOLDER: THE ALGORITHM'S INFLUENCE.

Issues monitoring is a key factor in an organisation's ability to respond effectively and appropriately when issues arise, especially if an issue has the potential to become a crisis.

To successfully navigate a crisis, communication leaders require the ability to distinguish genuine threats from everyday challenges, and the organisational resilience to weather the storm. In 2019, before the last economic downturn, one-fifth of Council Members even believed that every issue must be treated as a potential crisis until proven otherwise.³⁴

One element which wouldn't have featured on risk matrices ahead of previous economic downturns is Artificial Intelligence. The transformational impact that AI will have on our lives is broadly accepted. In 2024's Reputation Council Report, 87% of Council Members agreed that AI will fundamentally transform the way that businesses operate,³⁵ while in a 32-country Ipsos study in 2024, 66% said AI would profoundly change their daily life in the next 3-5 years, while 50% said it already had.³⁶

However, there is also substantial concern about the future of AI. 80% of Council Members in 2024 did not feel that existing ethical policies in business were sufficient for the adoption of AI, while 78% felt that unregulated AI could be a threat to humanity.³⁷ The general public in the UK is also worried; more people (19%) think it will have a negative impact

on their personal financial circumstance than a positive impact (16%).³⁸

In interviews carried out for the 2025 sitting of the Reputation Council, Council Members make a clear link between AI and the proliferation of dis- and misinformation. And with trust at a premium during challenging economic times, organisations need to be wary of what Large Language Models (LLMs) are saying about them.

One Council Member tells us, "We quite often ask AI its perceptions of our business. And so I think from a reputational perspective, the threats are where it pulls its information from when there is quite a lot of misinformation about us out in the ether."³⁹

Knowing that LLMs can be a source of inaccurate information, and being able to track that in some way, is one thing. But having the tools to influence an answer from ChatGPT is another. As another Council Member explains, a communicator's usual go-to tactics of relationship building or drafting a tight statement simply won't work.

"I can't take AI for lunch. I can't send AI a position statement or an e-mail to correct its thinking. So how on Earth do I deal with AI as a stakeholder, as a channel, as an audience? I don't know."⁴⁰

However, some organisations are beginning to understand where LLMs are drawing their information from and are shaping their earned and owned strategies as a result.

As a third Council Member tells us, "I would say AI is our most important stakeholder because we have to do things, have stuff published in certain media, that we know will influence the Large Language Models and Search in a particular way... We've got a good feeling about what feeds AI search in particular, we know our own website, our own newsroom indexes very highly on Google, so we know that if we need to get messages across we tend to have maybe an owned strategy rather than an earned strategy."⁴¹

While AI awareness and adoption has only increased slightly over the last year (usage in the US increased by just three percentage points from 42% to 45% between March 2024 and March 2025), most American AI users have used it to search for information (up from 48% in March 2024 to 69% in March 2025).⁴² In uncertain times, with the public increasingly using AI as a knowledge source, organisations will need to not just monitor, but also influence AI outputs to remain resilient.

"I can't take AI for lunch. I can't send AI a position statement or an e-mail to correct its thinking. So how on Earth do I deal with AI as a stakeholder, as a channel, as an audience? I don't know."

8. RECOVER AND RISE: STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT FOR POST-DOWNTURN SUCCESS.

Reputational resilience is a key contributor to an organisation's capacity to weather economic storms and emerge from a potential recession. Although short-term tactics are necessary to address immediate priorities in today's volatile landscape, long-term planning is essential for post-crisis success.

A 2010 Harvard Business Review (HBR) study found that firms which administered the most dramatic cost-cutting in a downturn were the least likely to outperform the

competition post-recession. The most likely companies to later become industry leaders were those which balanced cost-cutting with future-focused investments.⁴³

A healthy dialogue with stakeholders is a key contributing factor to an organisation's long-term resilience. In 2016, with memories from the global financial crash still fresh in their minds, we asked the Reputation Council what they felt to be the key factors in determining how an organisation can recover from a crisis. Council Members identified strong leadership and well-established relationships

From the following list, please can you tell me the top two traits that you think are most important in determining whether an organisation will recover well from a crisis?



Base: All Reputation Council members that answered question(92), interviewed April -August 2016.

Source: Reputation Council - Eleventh Sitting

“You have to walk the talk or live up to what you’re trying to project in terms of your communications and how you behave”

with stakeholders as the most important considerations by far, with a committed and engaged workforce a comfortable third.⁴⁴

But it is important to remember that stakeholders are not there to simply smile and nod – they are there to challenge, to disagree even. During the Great Recession, a majority (56%) of Council Members reported experiencing cynical responses when trying to engage with stakeholders,⁴⁵ but in many cases, they expected, or even welcomed, scepticism.

“I think they’re right to be cynical when you see what’s happened to a lot of the organisations who obviously said everything was great.”

Their approach to dealing with cynicism and push-back from stakeholders remains the best practice, fifteen years on: be transparent, avoid say-do gaps, and ensure a proper two-way dialogue.

“You have to walk the talk or live up to what you’re trying to project in terms of your communications and how you behave. So, I think the only way you can deal with cynicism is actually do what you say you’re going to do.”

“Real engagement is not one-way communication, you should be engaging the stakeholder if you genuinely want to hear what their opinion is and then give them access to change your business decision-making...”

“If you are in discussion and engaging with

those people that see a value in it then you’re likely to encounter less cynicism.”

After the 2007 financial crash, communicators were forced to tighten their belts, and ‘do more with less’. However, in keeping with the best practice identified in the HBR study, many Council Members prioritised selective cost-cutting while protecting key investments in other areas. Spend in non-essential areas was slashed (two-thirds reduced conference attendance, overseas travel and spend on corporate sponsorship and hospitality) while agency contracts were maintained, with Council Members preferring to renegotiate rather than terminate entirely.⁴⁶

Retreating from engagement strategies in a downturn can severely damage an organisation's long-term reputation and stakeholder relationships. While reducing costs, pausing comms activities or sidelining ESG initiatives may seem necessary, neglecting initiatives that build trust and enhance stakeholder experience is counterproductive.

If stakeholders perceive that they are being excluded or undervalued, trust will be eroded, and they will become disengaged. This is a time to nurture and strengthen stakeholder relationships, not abandon them. Costs must be managed, but this must be balanced carefully, with initiatives that add value and demonstrate commitment to stakeholders, protecting reputation and fostering long-term resilience.



CONCLUSION.

KNOW YOUR STANDING: ACT NOW TO SAFEGUARD TRUST

Understanding your reputation, its drivers, and potential vulnerabilities is crucial for strategic decision-making in a downturn and forms the foundation for all other communication activities. Put bluntly, if you don't fully understand your reputation, how can you be sure of the right way to properly protect or promote it?

Resilience is critical during any kind of crisis. A strong reputation, built on trust and authenticity, acts as a buffer against headwinds, while a weak or damaged reputation can be quickly eroded in difficult times. Many organisations found this out first-hand during the Great Recession of 2007-2009, and as our journey into the Reputation Council archives has found, forward-thinking businesses made sure to invest in maintaining stakeholder trust despite short-term cost challenges.

Stakeholder research offers valuable insights into public, employee, investor, media, and policymaker perceptions. Complementing these surveys, social media monitoring and sentiment analysis reveal real-time public opinion and identify potential reputational threats, while media analysis provides a broader perspective on media and public perception. Finally, competitor benchmarking helps identify areas of strength and weakness relative to your industry peers.

Once you have a clear picture of your current reputation, the next step is identifying its key drivers. A recession can expose existing reputational vulnerabilities, and key driver analysis can proactively identify these weak spots before a crisis exacerbates them. A proactive reputation management strategy, informed by this understanding, should focus on several key areas. Further enhancing key reputation drivers can reinforce strengths, addressing vulnerabilities and developing a robust crisis communication plan can mitigate potential risks, and building and maintaining relationships with key stakeholders, helps manage perceptions and build trust. Finally, continuous monitoring and measurement of your reputation allows you to identify emerging issues and adapt your strategy as needed.

By proactively managing your reputation, you can build resilience, mitigate risks, and emerge from a recession stronger and more trusted by your stakeholders. This foundational understanding of your reputational landscape informs all other communication activities, ensuring your messaging is aligned with your values, resonates with your audience, and protects your most valuable asset: your reputation.

Footnotes:

- 01 Ipsos Economic Optimism Index, April 2025
- 02 Ipsos UK Public opinion towards US tariffs, April 2025
- 03 Ipsos Reputation Council Report – Eighteenth Sitting, fieldwork (report not yet published)
- 04 Ipsos Happiness Index, March 2025
- 05 Ipsos Global Reputation Monitor, December 2022
- 06 Ipsos Global Reputation Monitor, December 2022
- 07 Ipsos Reputation Council – First Sitting
- 08 Ipsos Reputation Council – Second Sitting
- 09 Ipsos What Worries the World: February 2021
- 10 Ipsos What Worries the World: February 2023
- 11 Ipsos Reputation Council Report – Eleventh Sitting
- 12 Ipsos Karian and Box IC Index 2024
- 13 Ipsos Karian and Box IC Index 2024
- 14 Ipsos Karian and Box IC Index 2024
- 15 Ipsos Karian and Box IC Index 2024
- 16 Ipsos Reputation Council – Second Sitting
- 17 Ipsos Global Trustworthiness Monitor 2022
- 18 Ipsos Reputation Council Report – Tenth Sitting
- 19 Ipsos poll on behalf of PepsiCo Beverages North America, 14 May 2020
- 20 Ipsos, The Empathy Gap and How to Bridge It, December 2023
- 21 Ipsos Innovation in Challenging Times, March 2020,
- 22 Ipsos Global Trustworthiness Monitor, 2022
- 23 Ipsos Reputation Council Report – Sixteenth Sitting
- 24 Ipsos Reputation Council Report – Fifteenth Sitting
- 25 Ipsos Reputation Council Report – Eighteenth Sitting, fieldwork
- 26 Ipsos Consumer Tracker, 15th January 2025
- 27 Ipsos MMA – Successful Brands Resist the Temptation to Cut Brand Media During Turbulent Times, January 2022
- 28 Ipsos Reputation Council Report – First Sitting
- 29 Ipsos Reputation Council Report – Eighth Sitting
- 30 Ipsos Reputation Council Report – Eighteenth Sitting, fieldwork
- 31 Ipsos Reputation Council Report – Eighteenth Sitting, fieldwork
- 32 Ipsos ESG Council Report – Second Sitting
- 33 Ipsos ESG Council Report – Second Sitting
- 34 Ipsos Reputation Council Report – Thirteenth Sitting
- 35 Ipsos Reputation Council Report – Seventeenth Sitting
- 36 Ipsos Reputation Council Report – Seventeenth Sitting
- 37 Ipsos Reputation Council Report – Seventeenth Sitting
- 38 Ipsos, Attitudes towards AI – February 2025
- 39 Ipsos Reputation Council Report – Eighteenth Sitting, fieldwork
- 40 Ipsos Reputation Council Report – Eighteenth Sitting, fieldwork
- 41 Ipsos Reputation Council Report – Eighteenth Sitting, fieldwork
- 42 Ipsos Consumer Tracker – March 2025
- 43 <https://hbr.org/2010/03/roaring-out-of-recession>
- 44 Ipsos Reputation Council Report – Eleventh Sitting
- 45 Ipsos Reputation Council Report – Second Sitting
- 46 Ipsos Reputation Council Report – Second Sitting

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