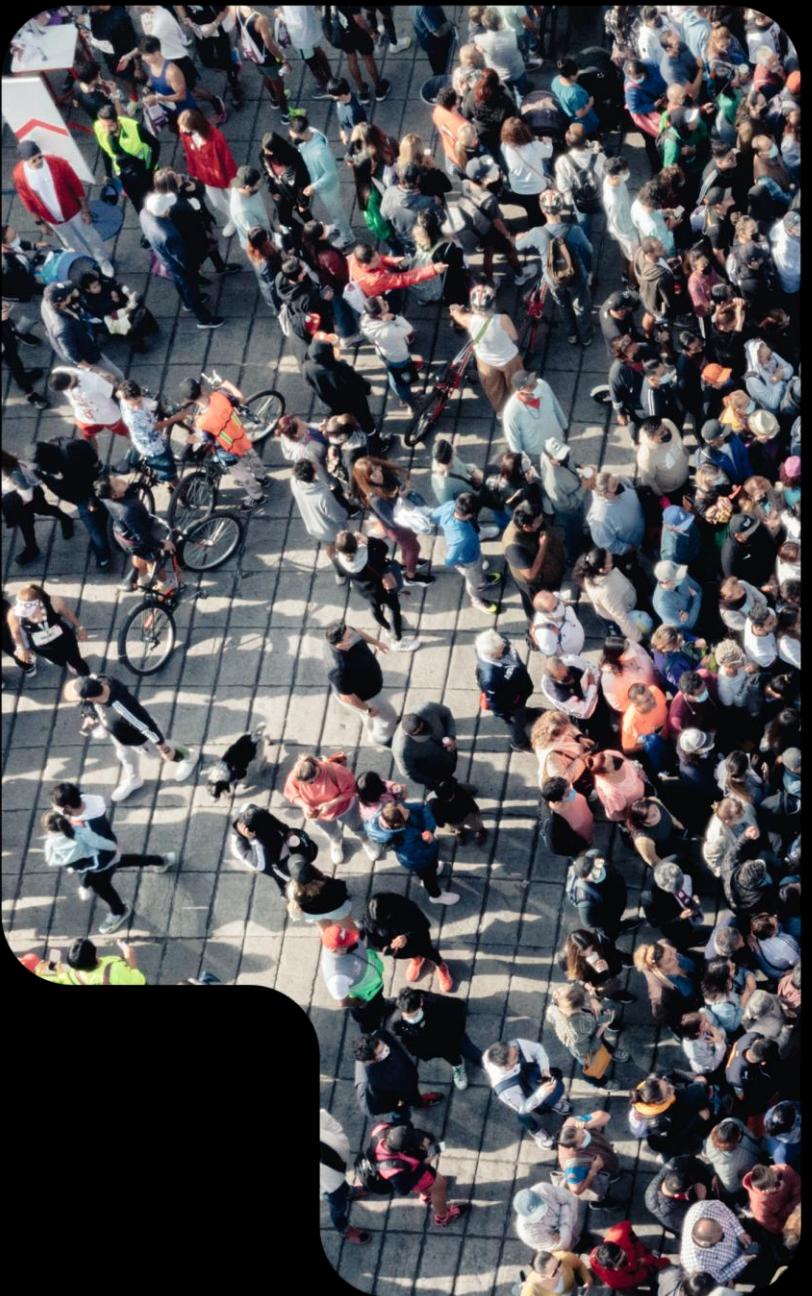




# RISK, REPUTATION AND REWARD: A GLOBAL TRENDS REPORT



# CONTENTS

- 01 Executive Summary
- 02 Political Risk
- 03 Media Landscape
- 04 Artificial Intelligence
- 05 Consumer Trust & Loyalty
- 06 Energy and Sustainability
- 07 Conclusion
- 08 Get in touch

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**With 2025 in the rearview mirror, business leaders are now firmly focused on the year ahead.**

Many of the likely challenges can, with some degree of confidence, be predicted. Others will take us by surprise.

Grayling's Global Trends Report aims to highlight some of the risks, and opportunities, confronting businesses in today's volatile and hyper-connected world – and help to hone corporate and media strategies.

It highlights how geopolitical tensions, notably Russia's war on Ukraine, the US/China rivalry and US ambitions in South America and beyond, will continue to weigh on the global economy while the policies of governments, especially across the EU, will add to the backdrop of rising costs and fiscal uncertainty.

The reputational risks posed by our ever-growing reliance on artificial intelligence adds another dimension of risk while a rapidly evolving and increasingly fragmented media landscape will elevate the need for agile and focused strategies.

Meanwhile, after a year in which the crippling impact of cyber attacks was laid bare, research by Grayling shows that four in five business leaders remain deeply concerned about digital security.

It is interesting that 62% of business leaders believe threats to business will increase in 2026 and yet nearly 85% feel very or somewhat optimistic about their business's growth prospects, with those in the UK, Spain, Germany and US among the most bullish.

I hope that this year's Trends report helps to inform and shape your strategy in the coming year and please do not hesitate to get in touch with any questions or comments.

Wishing you a successful year,

**Richard Jukes**



**The outlook is complex and despite acknowledgement of risk businesses remain optimistic they will grow - focus, reputation and resilience will define how true that turns out to be.**

**Richard Jukes**  
Global CEO, Grayling

# POLITICAL RISK

## GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

**From geopolitical tensions and military conflicts to economic instability and social unrest, perhaps the only certainty in 2026 is uncertainty.**

Businesses face a suite of ever-evolving risks and it will be crucial to look ahead, anticipate threats and plan accordingly. On the international stage, expect the shifting tectonic plates of geopolitics to contribute to further volatility in supply chains and costs.

Russia's war in Ukraine will continue to weigh on the global economy, while the potential for escalating conflicts in regions such as the Middle East and South America and growing tensions between China and Japan over Taiwan could further undermine global stability. When it comes to the US and China, the dust has settled on a tussle over tariffs but the threat to international trade will continue to evolve as strategic competition plays out in 2026 and beyond.

Across Europe, Grayling sees a shifting political landscape that is likely to become more fragmented amid signs of social unrest. The rise of far-right and far-left parties and an increasingly divisive tone of political discourse point to potential upheaval in the regulatory environment in which businesses operate.

In short, politics matters, and the need to anticipate change with a clear plan is non-negotiable for businesses.





**55%**

of business leaders  
feel their current  
government is  
supportive of  
business

**18%**

a notable minority in  
both the US (18%)  
and France (17%)  
report no perceived  
regulatory uncertainty

**33%**

of business leaders  
cite government  
regulatory and policy  
changes as a top  
threat to business in  
2026 (highest-ranked  
threat overall)

**“**

**Europe’s political environment is more fragmented, cost-sensitive and exposed to shocks than in previous cycles.** For business, effective public affairs engagement is now essential to manage regulatory uncertainty and uneven implementation across the EU.

**Jessica Brobald**

Managing Director, Grayling Brussels

**”**

# MEDIA LANDSCAPE

## GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

**Media fragmentation has fundamentally changed how influence is built and tested.**

Journalists remain important, but online creators, podcasters, and platform-native voices now shape public narratives at scale, often setting the agenda before traditional outlets respond. There's another critical factor: algorithms that now determine what content surfaces, and what spreads, with speed often outpacing verification.

In response, many organizations are optimising for reach and efficiency to remain visible in crowded feeds. But visibility alone no longer sustains influence. Credibility, trust, and message consistency are increasingly fragile as misinformation spreads and context erodes.

Success in 2026 will depend on balancing scale with credibility, and earning influence through clarity, consistency, and disciplined engagement rather than volume alone.





**44%**

of business leaders state expanding reach across online media channels as a media strategy goal

**20%**

only 1/5 believe **traditional** print media is the most effective channel for communicating to their key audiences

**9%**

less than 1/10 business leaders globally say building strong relationships with journalists is a key media goal for 2026

“

**Media fragmentation is widely understood, but the priority is clear: organisations must think beyond reach to ensure they are discoverable, credible, and consistent in environments shaped by media and algorithms.**

**Esty Pujadas**

CEO, North America, Grayling

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# ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

## GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

**The global evolution of AI gathers pace and while mainstream integration of the technology is set to expand in 2026, the rate and depth of adoption will vary significantly between countries.**

In the US, the Trump administration has made it a priority to lead and win the AI race to protect economic competitiveness and national security, with huge investments in key sectors, including technology and energy.

Grayling research suggests the vast majority (87%) of business leaders are trialling or integrating AI into their business amid expectations that the technology will fundamentally change their industry's competitive landscape by 2029.

However, concerns over privacy, impact on jobs, and ethical use of the technology look set to temper AI adoption with integration in sensitive areas such as digital identification delayed across the EU until December 2027.

Regardless of where in the world you operate, artificial intelligence will transform how businesses and brands reach and engage their audience.

Ranking high in AI recommendations as SEO evolves into Generative Engine Optimization must become a priority, alongside being ready for heightened scrutiny when it comes to ethical use of AI and striking the right balance between AI-generated and original content.





**87%**

of business leaders claim to be trailing or implementing AI in some way into their business, with a belief that AI will fundamentally change their industry's competitive landscape in the next 3.5 years, on average.

**41%**

cite integrating AI into legacy systems (41%) as the top barriers to larger-scale AI adoption include, followed by skills gaps (35%)

**62%**

feel concerned about the reputational risks AI poses to their business.

“

**The greatest AI risk isn't getting it wrong — it's moving too slowly.**

In a moment of rapid change, complacency looks like leadership failure, and that's the reputational cost businesses can't afford.

**Nathan Kemp**

Global Chief Innovation Officer, Grayling

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# CONSUMER TRUST & BRAND LOYALTY

## GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

**The relationship between brands and customers has arguably never been more fragile and as we head into 2026, building and maintaining trust is one of the biggest challenges for businesses.**

The cost-of-living crisis has placed a new premium on price and brands are under the microscope like never before as supply chains, working conditions and environmental impact are scrutinised by customers.

Those that connect with their audience on a firm footing of shared values and transparency, driven by campaigns that tap into genuine, human-centric experiences, stand the best chance of success.

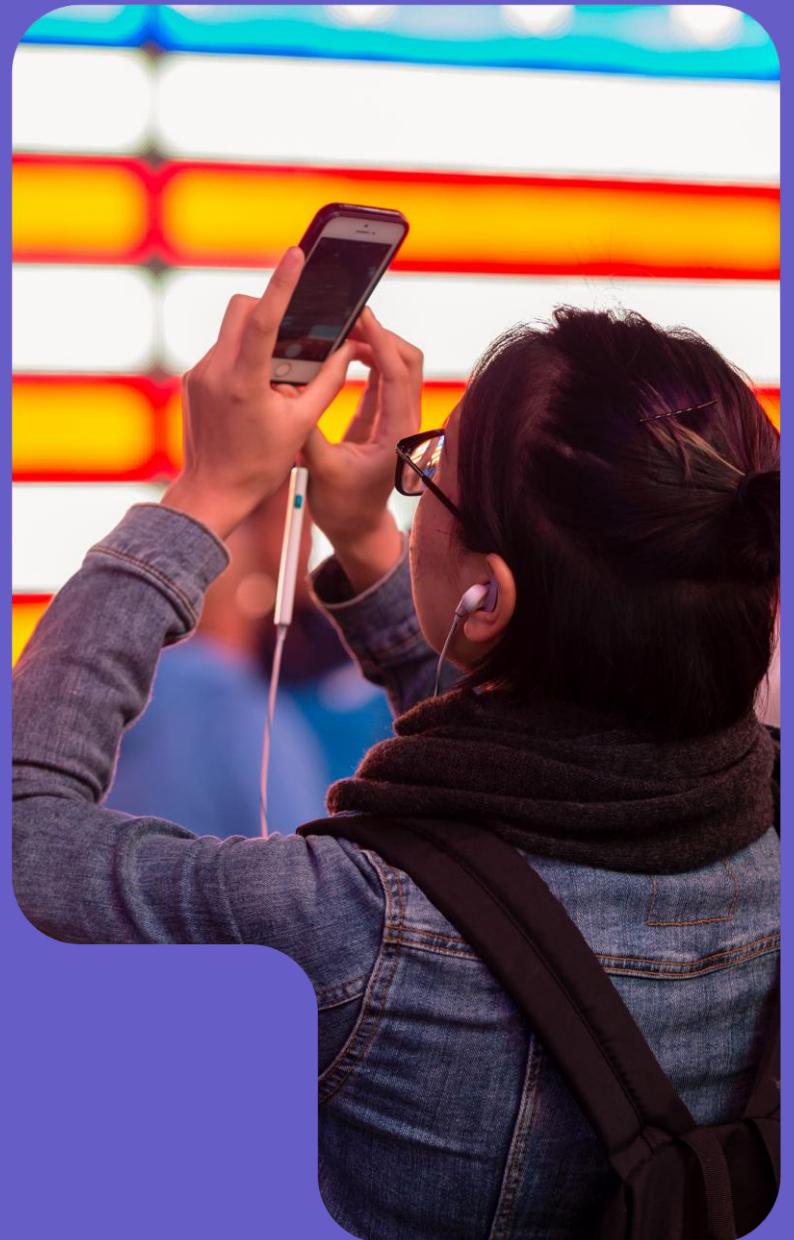
But rhetoric alone will not be enough.

Companies need to ensure full alignment between business practices and brand messaging to succeed in a market where consistency and accountability are non-negotiable.

In addition, AI technology is profoundly shaping how consumers discover and engage with brands in the digital space with optimised searches that recommend the most trustworthy and reputable.

As ever, a balance will need to be struck.

With reputation driving revenue, companies must balance technology with ethical, consistent, and human storytelling to gain a competitive edge.



**90%**

of business leaders say reputation has a direct impact on their bottom line

**45%**

business leaders cite customer ratings/reviews as the top factor for strong brand reputation, followed by business ethics (42%)

**69%**

agree that consumers are swayed by companies' leaders' when judging their reputation

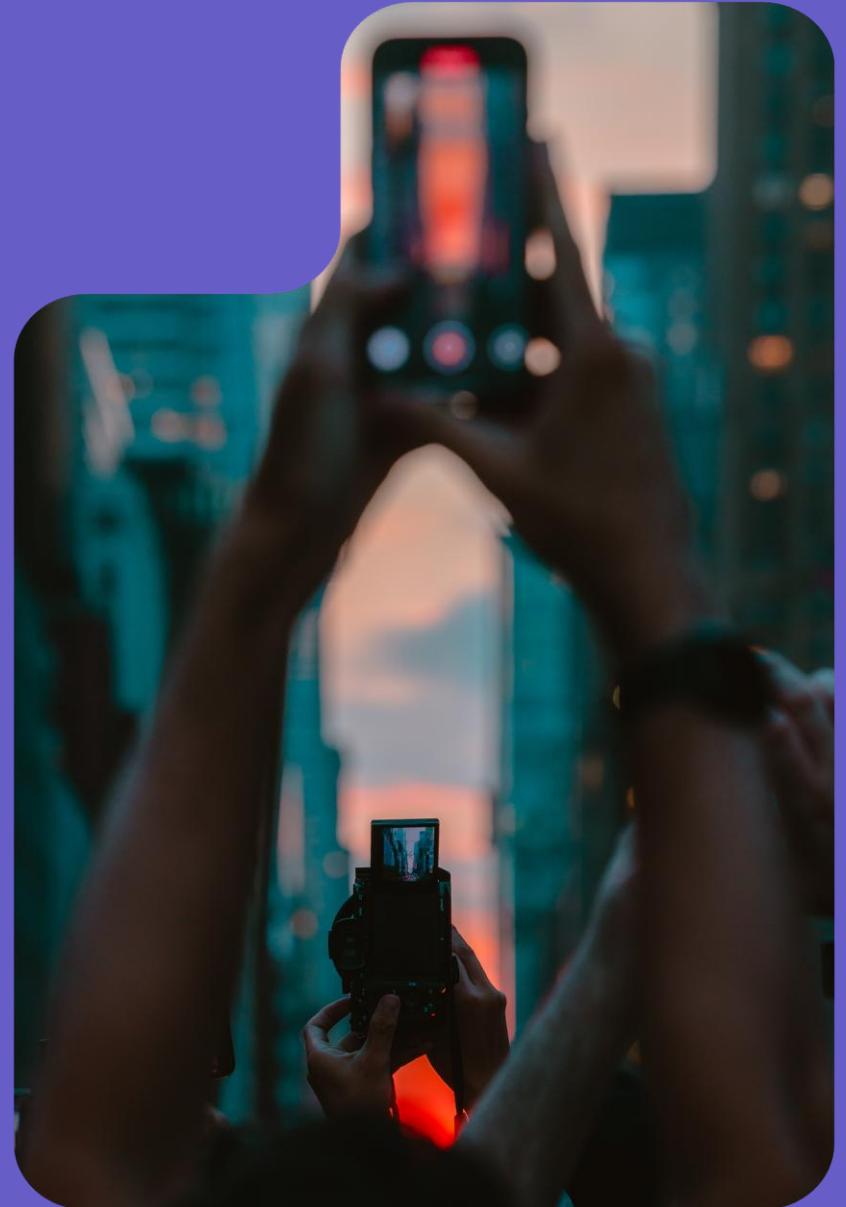
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**Transparency and shared values are the currency of consumer loyalty.** Brands that authentically align their actions with their promises - and can prove it - will thrive where others struggle to survive in today's scrutiny-driven marketplace.

**Danny Tan**

MD, Grayling Singapore

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# ENERGY & SUSTAINABILITY

## GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

**Businesses face elevated risks in the year ahead as governments juggle the renewable energy transition with grid capacity, energy price volatility and geopolitical tensions.**

Russia's war in Ukraine is likely to continue to disrupt supply chains, threatening stability, operational reliability and long-term planning.

High energy costs are set to remain a challenge for many businesses in the year ahead, especially in countries such as the UK, Poland and Spain where levels of concern are among the highest.

Across much of Europe, however, the emphasis in 2026 will be scaling up infrastructure to accommodate the rise in green energy and electricity demands driven by the rapid growth of AI and data centres.

In many ways, it will be business as usual for firms; in a climate where trust in information is fragile, authenticity and clarity should be the cornerstone of communications.

The phased rollout of the EU's Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive extends to small to medium companies in 2026 and will allow greater public scrutiny of companies' green credentials.

For corporate affairs professionals, the ability to integrate sustainability into core strategy, manage complex reporting requirements and demonstrate genuine resilience will be essential for maintaining competitiveness and a "social license to operate".





**45%**

of all business leaders,  
said that  
environmental  
sustainability will be  
more of a priority for  
their corporate  
communications in  
2026

**58%**

of leaders cite  
government policy as  
the leading driver of  
an increased focus  
on environmental  
sustainability in  
communications

**76%**

of business leaders  
are concerned  
about the impact  
of rising energy  
costs and supply  
instability

“

**Energy volatility and regulatory expansion demand more than compliance, they require strategic foresight.** Companies that transparently integrate sustainability into operations, not just communications, will secure both market position and stakeholder confidence in uncertain times.

**Peter Fecko**  
Regional CEO, Grayling CEE

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# CONCLUSION

**The risks facing businesses in 2026 are, in many respects, broadly familiar.**

Geopolitical tensions and the actions of governments will continue to disrupt economies, unsettle markets and breed uncertainty while the need for brands to act ethically and transparently under the glare of social media will only increase in the year ahead.

But in a world increasingly shaped and driven by technology, corporate reputations are perhaps more fragile than ever.

The adoption of artificial intelligence is set to accelerate with the promise of efficiencies but businesses that fail to embed robust governance or plan for worst-case scenarios, are vulnerable to reputational damage.

Additionally, the threat of cyber attacks and the significant harm that can be inflicted on brands rightly concerns many business leaders.

In a fast-changing world – and a risk landscape that is shifting with equal pace – corporate affairs leaders cannot afford to rely on reactive crisis management.

The need to think ahead and anticipate what might be around the corner has never been more important.

Strategic agility and the need for businesses to cultivate a strong, ethical culture with transparent communication, is an imperative.

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**Reputation risk in 2026 demands strategic foresight.** Businesses must proactively embed governance, anticipate technological disruption and ensure their ethical foundations are resilient enough to withstand unprecedented scrutiny and complexity.

**Richard Jukes**  
Global CEO, Grayling



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# GET IN TOUCH

## THANK YOU FOR READING OUR REPORT.

If you'd like to discuss how Grayling can support you in navigating these shifts and strengthening your reputation in 2026, please get in touch with:

**Richard Jukes, Global CEO, Grayling:**  
[Richard.Jukes@Grayling.com](mailto:Richard.Jukes@Grayling.com).

**CONTACT US**

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## ABOUT GRAYLING

Grayling is the world's local communications agency. With 30 offices around the world, it has the reach, influence and infrastructure of a global agency, with the creativity, connections and cultural know-how of a boutique. Combining a breadth of expertise across consumer, corporate, public affairs, digital and creative services, with proprietary technologies and an inclusive culture, Grayling develops and delivers award-winning communications campaigns that create advantage for its clients. Grayling is part of Accordience, alongside Citigate Dewe Rogerson, Red, and Cirkle.

Find out more at [www.grayling.com](http://www.grayling.com).