CUP OF CORPORATE COMMS

An unfiltered look at what's percolating now

Below are key themes that dominated corporate communications news in February 2025.

DEI REMAINS A BATTLEGROUND.

Corporate DEI strategies are increasingly polarized. *TIME* reported that while some companies are holding steady, many others are scaling back. *Banking Dive* and *HR Dive* covered major banks — including U.S. Bank, Bank of America and Wells Fargo — rolling back DEI-linked hiring goals and fair pay commitments, while *The Wall Street Journal* highlighted that BlackRock — once a leader in promoting DEI — has cut all DEI references from its latest annual report, reflecting a broader trend among financial institutions. At the same time, *Fast Company* reported that Apple shareholders rejected a proposal aimed at limiting the company's DEI initiatives, and another *Fast Company* piece reported that Deere & Co. shareholders did the same. Meanwhile *The New York Times* and *TIME* noted that even Trump supporters have increasingly mixed feelings about his executive orders targeting DEI, as well as the companies that comply with it. In a related piece, *Quartz* reported that Target has experienced a measurable decline in foot traffic following its DEI pullbacks. Additionally, *Forbes* and *Fast Company* both covered that the People's Union USA has called for a nationwide economic blackout on Feb. 28, urging consumers to pause spending in protest of corporate DEI pullbacks. Together, these stories paint a complex picture of the business, consumer and social forces shaping the future of corporate DEI in the U.S. and beyond.

Bottom line: The landscape is shifting, but the business case for DEI remains. Leaders and communicators must be prepared for heightened scrutiny — from employees, investors and consumers alike. This moment demands a clear, values-driven approach that accounts for legal uncertainty, regional nuances and the evolving expectations of key stakeholders. A reactive stance could carry long-term reputational and business risks.

ESG STRATEGIES CONTINUE TO EVOLVE UNDER SCRUTINY.

The debate over ESG is evolving — both in substance and in name. *The Wall Street Journal* reported that companies are increasingly moving away from the term 'ESG' in favor of concepts like resilience, reflecting investor sentiment and political pushback. Meanwhile, *Reuters* and *ESG Dive* highlighted high-profile corporate shifts, including Wells Fargo's decision to drop its financed emissions targets and IKEA's decision to scale back its zero-emissions delivery goal — both signaling a broader recalibration of sustainability strategies. While some companies reassess their commitments, the *Financial Times* noted that pressure from investors and regulators remains strong, particularly in global markets. At the same time, *BBC* and *LSE Business Review* covered the implications of President Trump's executive orders, which are expected to shape ESG policies for years to come.

Bottom line: The ESG conversation is no longer just about sustainability — it is about risk management, business resilience and long-term value creation. Communicators must be attuned to shifting terminology and evolving investor, regulatory and consumer expectations to craft messages that resonate across stakeholder groups, while maintaining credibility in a changing landscape.

PRESS UNDER PRESSURE CHALLENGES BRAND COMMUNICATIONS.

The role of an independent press is facing new challenges, with ripple effects for brands navigating an increasingly fractured media landscape. *The New York Times* reported on internal tensions at *The Washington Post*, where leadership changes and editorial shifts have sparked debates about the publication's direction. Another *New York Times* piece detailed the backlash to *The Washington Post*'s decision to pull an ad critical of President Trump, raising questions about media independence and corporate influence. Meanwhile the *Associated Press* highlighted how Elon Musk, leveraging his ownership of X and his influential role within the Trump administration, has been actively promoting presidential initiatives to his extensive follower base while targeting critics and agencies opposing his agenda. These developments reflect a broader shift, as government actions and media ownership dynamics continue to shape journalistic freedom and public trust in news.

Bottom line: As the U.S. media landscape grows more polarized, communicators and marketers must be mindful of where and how they engage. Maintaining credibility, ensuring transparency and carefully selecting media partnerships will be essential in navigating shifting press dynamics while protecting brand reputation.

POLITICAL TENSIONS ARE REDEFINING WORKPLACE CONVERSATIONS.

Political tensions are seeping into workplace conversations, putting managers and HR leaders in a challenging position. *Fortune* reported that workplace political conflicts have surged, with employees increasingly looking to management to set clear boundaries and foster a productive environment. According to *Benefits Pro*, 91% of American workers have witnessed or experienced political clashes at work, with 83% anticipating rising tensions under the current administration. A recent *Resume Now* survey also revealed that 81% of employees feel workplace political tensions have increased since President Trump's election, with 51% actively avoiding coworkers with differing views. *HR Grapevine* highlighted the growing legal risks tied to workplace banter, with offhand comments leading to compliance headaches and potential lawsuits. Meanwhile *Forbes* outlined strategies for creating transparent, open work environments that enable dialogue while maintaining respect and professionalism — an approach that is becoming more critical as companies navigate the politicization of topics like DEI and ESG.

Bottom line: Leaders cannot ignore workplace tensions, but they can shape how conversations unfold. Setting clear guidelines, modeling inclusive communication, and providing structured, psychologically safe forums for discussion can help mitigate conflict while maintaining a culture of respect and collaboration, as outlined by *Stanford Business*.

EMPLOYEE EXPECTATIONS ARE SHIFTING FASTER THAN EVER.

Companies are facing increasing challenges in retaining and engaging their workforce, as employee expectations continue to evolve in response to corporate decisions. *Business Insider* reported that Meta's latest wave of layoffs has sparked fear among employees, leading some to quietly update their LinkedIn profiles amidst CEO Mark Zuckerberg's push for a high-performance culture. *The New York Times* detailed the internal turmoil at *The Washington Post*, where shifting leadership priorities have led to newsroom tensions and uncertainty. At the same time, *Ragan* covered the latest Gallup employee engagement data, which suggests that while engagement has stabilized post-pandemic, significant gaps remain — especially in how employees perceive leadership transparency and workplace culture. Research from *Harvard Business Review* focused on the importance of proactively promoting employees before the job market heats up, while *Forbes* highlighted mentorship and training programs to bolster engagement and retention. In a more unusual piece, *Business Insider Markets* discussed how fostering workplace friendships can significantly enhance employee retention, with 85% of companies acknowledging that such bonds make employees more likely to stay.

Bottom line: Employee engagement is directly tied to company culture, leadership decisions and perceived stability. As organizations continue restructuring and refining their strategies, leaders and communicators must prioritize transparency, provide clear career pathways and foster a culture of trust to maintain morale and performance.