CUP OF CORPORATE COMMS

AN UNFILTERED LOOK AT WHAT'S PERCOLATING NOW

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

BUSINESS IS NO LONGER A BYSTANDER TO GLOBAL CHALLENGES — IT HAS EARNED A LICENSE TO LEAD.

As the World Economic Forum approaches with its 2026 theme, *A Spirit of Dialogue*, recent coverage makes clear that expectations of business have shifted from neutrality to responsibility. The 2025 Meaningful Brands study found that 73% of people expect brands to act on societal challenges and 70% believe companies have a responsibility to improve health and well-being — a finding echoed in the 2025 Edelman Trust Barometer, which shows business remains the most trusted institution, but only when it leads where governments struggle. *Forbes* reinforced this shift, noting that Americans expect CEOs to speak out selectively and credibly, with mental health emerging as a priority issue. *TriplePundit* also reported strong, bipartisan support for corporate action on issues tied to community resilience — including mental health, family stability, education and workforce needs — offering clearer, lower-risk lanes for engagement. *HR Dive* linked this external pressure to internal results, highlighting research showing that leaders grounded in purpose and grit drive stronger engagement, performance and retention. *Fast Company* added that the most effective CEOs now treat philanthropy like strategy, aligning social investment with business values rather than dispersing it across disconnected causes. The message is unmistakable: Corporate engagement is no longer about visibility, but relevance, coherence and follow-through.

Bottom line: The question is no longer *whether* companies should engage on societal challenges, but *how*. Businesses need to focus on issues where they have credibility, align philanthropy with their values and operations, and prioritize areas with broad stakeholder support. Purpose-led action earns trust — and the license to lead.

DEI IS RE-ENTERING THE SPOTLIGHT AS REGULATORY SCRUTINY SHARPENS HEADING INTO 2026.

After a relatively quieter stretch over the second half of 2025, DEI is once again drawing heightened attention from regulators and policymakers — a shift that echoes themes HAVAS Red flagged in prior editions of our Cup of Corporate Comms. The focus is shifting from whether DEI should exist to how it is designed, documented and defended. *The Wall Street Journal* reported that the U.S. Department of Justice is exploring the use of the False Claims Act to investigate DEI-related practices, signaling a more aggressive interpretation of how federal funds and compliance obligations intersect with workplace programs. That scrutiny is set to intensify. *Reuters* reported that the EEOC's new leadership has framed 2026 as a "reckoning" year for corporate DEI, with renewed emphasis on civil rights enforcement and closer examination of hiring, promotion and incentive structures. **(Cont.)**

(Cont.) At the same time, *HR Dive*'s review of where major companies — including Apple, Disney, JPMorgan and Target — landed on DEI in 2025 revealed a more nuanced landscape: fewer headline-grabbing rollbacks, more recalibration and a clear shift toward legally durable, skills- and performance-based approaches. *ESG Dive* illustrated the risk of missteps, detailing how Starbucks' DEI programs became the subject of a lawsuit alleging unlawful race-based practices and underscoring the growing consequences of poorly structured initiatives.

Bottom line: DEI is entering a more exacting phase. For communicators and business leaders, the imperative is rigor over retreat: ensure programs are compliant, clearly documented and rooted in job-related criteria. Precision, transparency and confidence will define which organizations withstand scrutiny — and which invite it.

SUSTAINABILITY COMMUNICATIONS NOW REQUIRE PRECISION, WITH SILENCE AND OVERSTATEMENT BOTH CARRYING HIGH RISK.

As sustainability claims face intensifying scrutiny, recent coverage made it clear that how companies talk about their green initiatives can be just as risky as what they do. The *Financial Times* reported that advertisements from Nike, Lacoste and Superdry were banned for greenwashing, underscoring how regulators are cracking down on vague, exaggerated or insufficiently substantiated environmental claims. What once passed as aspirational language is now being treated as a potential legal liability, particularly when claims cannot be clearly tied to measurable actions or outcomes. Yet overcorrection brings its own dangers. *MIT Sloan Management Review* warned of the "greenhushing" trap, in which companies stay silent about sustainability efforts to avoid scrutiny — only to risk skepticism, lost credibility and accusations of inaction. The article argued that withholding information can erode trust just as quickly as overstating progress, especially among stakeholders who expect transparency and evidence-based communication. Adding a legal lens, DLA Piper's sustainability review highlighted the rapidly evolving litigation landscape, noting that enforcement actions, investor scrutiny and consumer lawsuits are increasingly shaping how companies disclose environmental commitments. Together, the coverage signals a narrow but navigable path forward: neither hype nor hush, but disciplined, defensible clarity.

Bottom line: Sustainability communications must strike a careful balance, avoiding broad, feel-good claims that cannot be substantiated, without retreating into silence. Every message needs to be grounded in verifiable data, clearly explaining scope and limitations, and communicating progress with humility and specificity. Credible transparency is now the safest — and strongest — strategy.

BRAND TRUST IS INCREASINGLY BUILT BY PEOPLE — BUT AUTHENTICITY IS FRAGILE.

As brands work to deepen trust in a crowded, skeptical media environment, recent coverage reinforces a theme we flagged in our 2023 behind-the-brand prediction: people-led content drives connection — when it is done with care. *The Wall Street Journal* reported that companies are **(Cont.)**

(Cont.) increasingly seeking "storytellers" who can humanize brands through lived experience rather than polished messaging, reflecting a broader shift toward narratives rooted in real people and real moments. That shift is also reshaping roles inside organizations. Another *WSJ* feature highlighted the growing demand for employees who can act as credible, social-first brand ambassadors, blurring the line between internal culture and external storytelling. Influence, however, cuts both ways. *Harvard Business Review* cautioned that influencer marketing only builds trust when it prioritizes relevance, transparency and long-term alignment over reach, warning that transactional partnerships can quickly erode credibility. That message echoed insights from *WSJ CMO Today*, where American Express's CMO emphasized that brand authenticity starts internally — with employees who understand, believe in and consistently live the brand's values. When internal reality and external storytelling diverge, audiences notice.

Bottom line: Authenticity is an operating principle. Businesses must empower employees, customers and creators alike to tell real stories, grounding those stories in genuine experience and clear guardrails. Trust is built when brands amplify people who believe in what they say — and lost when storytelling outpaces truth.

REPUTATION MANAGEMENT IS BEING REWRITTEN BY AI — IN CALM MOMENTS AND IN CRISIS.

Recent coverage reinforces a shift we have been tracking: Large language models are fundamentally changing how reputation is formed, monitored and defended — not just during crises, but day to day. In *Meltwater's 2026 Marketing Trends* report, HAVAS Red EVP Melanie Klausner captures this shift succinctly, predicting that PR and earned media will evolve into strategic inputs for AI-driven discovery as generative engines increasingly interpret, summarize and surface brand narratives. That reality is already playing out across recent coverage. *Marketing Dive* reported that generative AI is fundamentally upending the traditional crisis playbook, with LLMs acting as intermediaries between brands and audiences — often shaping perception before official responses are issued. In this environment, reputational risk no longer spreads solely through headlines or social media, but through how AI systems ingest and reproduce a company's digital footprint. *PRWeek* underscored this shift by highlighting new data from Meltwater, which shows that AI-powered discovery is accelerating the speed at which narratives form — and harden. That reality raises the stakes for preparedness. *Forbes* added a complementary perspective, arguing that corporate online newsrooms have become critical reputation assets during crises, serving as authoritative, machine-readable sources that AI systems can reliably reference when misinformation or speculation spreads.

Bottom line: Reputation is no longer managed solely for human audiences. Invest in clear, credible and AI-readable content before a crisis hits, treat owned channels as strategic infrastructure, and assume that machines are now among your most influential stakeholders. Preparedness today determines credibility tomorrow.